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ABSTRACT

This book describes "The Learning Community," a minischool that was founded in 1972 by five teachers as an alternative program within a large urban high school in Astoria, New York. The Learning Community included 150 high school juniors and seniors and 6 teachers. The book overviews the development of the minischool, beginning with the first teachers' meeting to address the school's philosophy; the strategies used to promote positive teacher-student relationships; and decisions made by both teachers and students regarding curriculum and student evaluation. The Learning Community was based on a democratic approach to education that gave students the freedom to plan their own course of study and that recognized individual talents, abilities, and personalities. The curriculum included required skills courses; interdisciplinary courses in which students studied a single idea or concept from various perspectives; and minicourses that concentrated on specialized topics suggested by students and teachers. Instead of grades, students received personalized written evaluations that emphasized student accomplishments, as opposed to failures. An "open classroom" approach also allowed teachers and students to interact outside of instructional time and encouraged teachers to act as coordinators and facilitators of student learning. Although the program was regarded as a success, it was terminated in 1976 due to pressure from school administrators. (LP)

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THE LEARNING COMMUNITY: THE STORY OF A SUCCESSFUL MINI-SCHOOL

James Penha and John Azrak

Paulist Press

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"I have now read *The Learning Community*, and I think it is a perfectly wonderful book! It comes just in time, too. People are beginning to think that mini-schools are just so much education cant. This account shows what they might really be. I congratulate you and the authors. They might not realize it, but they have made an important contribution to the science as well as the art of teaching."

—Neil Postman, author of *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*

This book recreates the process that produced and continues to produce a successful school. Much has been written in the last few years about team teaching, the open classroom, the interdisciplinary approach, etc. Many teachers are aware of these educational alternatives but they lack evidence that such approaches can work. This is not a "how to do it" book. It is a "how we did it" book. It is the story of a school and its people. It shows that a real change can take place in a real situation when teachers and students become open to the intangibles of peopleness, the individual and social consciousness required for fundamental change, and most importantly, the disparate elements that taken together create community.

James Penha and John Azrak (co-authors) along with Angelo Gugliano, David Powell, and William Therway (contributors), are the founders of *The Learning Community*. They have been operating the school located within Mater Christi Diocesan High School in Astoria, N.Y. since the fall of 1972.

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THE LEARNING COMMUNITY

James Penha and John Azrak

PAULIST PRESS

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an important contribution to the science as well as the art of teaching —Neil Postman

James Penha and John Azrak

THE STORY OF A SUCCESSFUL MINI-SCHOOL

THE LEARNING COMMUNITY

is vastly more than the sum of its parts. For us its founders it represents.....

turn to page 1

4

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Love Pauline
Jack Wyman

James Penha and John Azrak
with: Angelo Giugliano/David Powell/William Therway

THE STORY OF A SUCCESSFUL MINI-SCHOOL

THE LEARNING COMMUNITY

PAULIST PRESS *NEW YORK / PARAMUS / TORONTO*

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for the students of The Learning Community
for John Gilroy and Loretta DiBenedetto
for Mary, Melissa, Eileen, Carol, and Annie

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An Introduction to the Book

The Learning Community is vastly more than the sum of its parts. For us, its founders, it represents a living creation. Yet, like all too many school programs, it remains in jeopardy of extinction according to the tides of administrative philosophy and finances. We are proud enough of the Community to want to assure some permanence for it and to inspire other such projects around the country.

"So let's write a book about the Community."

"Ah, just what the world needs—another volume on education to gather dust on the shelf or bore the pants off some unsuspecting undergraduate."

"Besides," a third interjected, "nothing we do—well not many things anyway—is really new. What could we say that Holt or Dewey or Postman hasn't already said. Hell, we don't even know what they said. We don't read that stuff. We've just been following our instincts."

"True, but we do *do* things. And lots of them. In conjunction with each other. The Learning Community is alive. It's not theory."

And that makes all the difference. We have no pretensions of being educational theorists. We are practicing teachers with a story to tell about how and why our high school works.

We try to avoid excess concentration on theory. From time to time, however, we will explain our motivation and, to be honest, we have not totally resisted the temptation to quote from the masters.

Mainly, though, this is our story. It has been worth writing—and is, we trust, worth reading—because the Learning Community is not a fluke. It need not be unique.

We offer few specific guidelines or "steps A through Z." A Learning Community must be organic and develop as its members allow it to develop. But Learning Communities can proliferate. And this book will help. Additionally, the Learning Community program has very realistic implications for all high school classes and programs and schools—even the most traditional. And this book will help.

Toward those ends, we decided we had to tell our story.

An Introduction to the Learning Community

The Learning Community is:

—a mini-school of 150 juniors and seniors and six teachers within a large urban high school.

—dedicated to an interdisciplinary approach to academics.

—dedicated to fostering a community spirit among its members.

—built on a structure, but remains flexible enough to meet the needs of individual students and to change according to the demands of the Community.

—composed of a varied student body and minimizes differences in age and grade.

—able to take advantage of outside experts, parents, professionals and students themselves, to supplement the faculty.

—an academic program in which each student is given the freedom and responsibility to plan his own course of study in consultation with his advisor.

—devoted to the recognition of individual talents, individual abilities, individual personalities and individual rates of growth and learning.

Curriculum

Skills Courses

—The morning of each day is devoted to those classes which concentrate on fields of study necessary to a student's maturation, graduation, acceptance into college and preparation for a vocation.

Interdisciplinary Community Themes

—The first half of each semester, during the afternoons, is given over to a Theme. The entire Community studies a single idea or theme from varying points of view. Assigned readings and core concepts are discussed and dramatized in seminars and field trips for which students sign up each week. We learn to examine a text or a work of art not in a vacuum but as part of a larger fabric.

Mini-Courses

—Between themes, the afternoons are devoted to short-

duration, concentrated courses on specialized topics as suggested by students and teachers.

Evaluation
Students receive personalized written evaluations instead of numerical or alphabetical grades. These supplement the continuing oral progress reports as teachers and students and advisors meet to discuss academic and social growth. A student who does not master a particular course to the best of his abilities may not receive credit for the course. But he will not receive an F. The emphasis in all evaluation is on what each student accomplishes or should accomplish, not on his failures.

Structuring
The Community has basic requirements and schedules to insure that everyone has the freedom to achieve his own educational goals. However, students have as many options and choices and possibilities within this framework as the Community can provide.

A Philosophy
We believe in the oneness of human knowledge and experience. We reject the false divisions of subject matter and activity. We believe that the common denominator of all the traditional disciplines is the attempt to understand man and his world and to better the state of mankind. Our interest in exposing human civilization to our students is in allowing them to know themselves and their environment and to better their lot. The fostering of interpersonal relationships, a sense of comradeship and community, is central to our goal.

To create a brotherhood to study the brotherhood of man—this is our goal. To discover the particular talents of each of our students and to develop them; to present knowledge in such a way as to adapt to the potentialities and interests of our members—these are our goals.

Devotion to community and respect for individuality are

not contradictories. A true sense of community can only exist if each student understands that the Learning Community depends upon his individuality and does not seek to suppress it.

Crucial to these ends is a redefinition of teacher and student roles. In the Learning Community, teachers are not considered the sole repositories of all knowledge and all truth. Students are not the passive eyes and ears of the old classroom tradition. Teachers are motivators, guides, resources and, themselves, students.

We believe that a structure of some kind is necessary to this philosophy, not merely to avoid chaos, but to insure freedom and flexibility.

A Personal Prologue

The news, like all news at every school everywhere, broke slowly at first. Within hours, officialdom raced to catch up with the rumors by placing the inevitable bulletin in all faculty mailboxes:

"Next year this high school will be divided into fifteen mini-schools . . . teachers should group themselves . . . prepare prospecti of how they expect their mini-schools to operate . . . within three weeks . . ."

Who first Paul Revered into the basement faculty rooms reading and posting the word we don't remember. Nor is it possible to recall which of us first told the other. It matters little. The reactions would have been identical either way:

"Read this."

"Wow, they're really going to do it."

"Yeah. Listen, we'd better start forming a group fast. I don't want to wind up with Marty or Lillian." Hysterical laughter ensued.

"But that's not really funny. It could happen. It's going to be crazy around here."

"I wonder if the administration will go for the idea of the two of us in the same group."

"Why the hell not? These mini-schools are supposed to have people who can work together as faculties. We've been friends long enough to read each other's mind. What more could they want?"

"But two English teachers?"

"Hmmm. Well, we can always explain that every student needs four years of English—so two of us makes sense. But, you know, they might also just want to split up everyone who thinks more like they do among the 'old guard.' "

"Oh, no. Well, we've got to start contacting people and get a good, firm group set."

"Who?"

Among the whole faculty, a mad rush of "join us" and "no" and "maybe" and "sure" and "who cares" was in high gear. Yet, this frenzy of pairs and trios of teachers searching for compatible mates was a crucial stage in the prehistory of

the Learning Community. The stakes were high. We were really to have the opportunity to mold and create a school. In such an undertaking, as we are now so much more aware, the intangibles of peopleness are paramount. In retrospect, in fact, it's obvious that the Learning Community would never have come to be without the serendipitous formation of faculty that took place in those frenetic few days. If it was obvious that the two of us should work together, we had the difficult task of extrapolating from the available evidence in our search for partners.

"We need someone in math."

It was fairly obvious whom to approach. Angelo was not an infrequent drinking buddy whose longing for something new and better in education was best reflected in his massive reorganization and individualization of the Math Department in his years as chairman.

A phone call that night:

"Yeah, that sounds great. But Bill and Dave approached me the other day about a group. We've all been working on the committee investigating mini-school possibilities so we had advance warning about this announcement. In fact, Dave was the one who suggested that mini-schools grow up from the grouping of teachers rather than from other starting points. Right after the meeting at which he made that proposal the three of us talked about getting together ourselves. We're all on the same wavelength. Bill has done incredible things as chairman of science. He turned the resource center into an all-day classroom. There's always something going on there and the kids love it. And he's not your cloistered scientist either. He's interested in everything. As for Dave, I've never seen anyone with more energy devoted to this job. He singlehandedly built that student Social Action Program, for one thing. And he's been fighting tooth and nail with the administration to open up education for the kids, to break down some of the ridiculous ruts and traditions we've been tied down with."

"I don't really know them that well. To tell you the truth I don't get to the science center too often and the only

times I see Dave are the few seconds when he runs into the faculty room to drop off his Bible and pick up his ACLU pamphlets. But, really, can we work together?"

"Well, they don't know you guys too well either but they were going to ask one of you to join them."

"It's scary. We can't blow this chance. We've been bitching and moaning for years about what *could* happen in school and now we've got to put up. But if we don't get a group that thinks along the same . . ."

"I think we all do," interrupted Angelo.

"Okay. But it has to be both of us for a total of five teachers. There's a lot of English to be taught and probably some helping out in other areas."

"Fine. It makes sense not to split up people who think alike when that's going to be the goal for all of us."

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Chapter One

PREPARING FOR COMMUNITY

Every man is a part of every other man.

Edie Doyle to Terry Molloy in *On the Waterfront*

With profound inarticulation, Marlon Brando's Terry mumbled an answer to his Beatrice, "You really believe all that drool?" The bridled energy of his response indicated the inner conflict raging between the regimented selfishness demanding Terry to keep "deaf and dumb," to watch out for his own skin, and that lurking need to concern himself with the plight of his fellow men. Who can grant himself the luxury of dismissing Terry Molloy as a uniquely sad and alienated individual?

Educators can kid themselves into believing that they have solved this dilemma by claiming that teaching is, by definition, a profession totally concerned with helping people. We know. We always thought so. How many times, when confronted with a suggestion to modernize a curriculum or revitalize a teaching method, did we say, with feigned wonderment, "What drool!" taking the easy rather than the idealistic way out?

School for us used to be an affair of different units—some programmed to be students, some to be teachers, some parents, some administrators—coming in contact for specified periods of time. Even the liberal administration which took charge of our high school in the mid-sixties and tried to implement the now familiar modular schedules, resource centers, study packets and the like succeeded mostly in antagonizing those self-interested units which felt their secure positions being threatened. There was no significant change in consciousness. Such change, after all, can rarely be ordained from the top.

Although Bill Therway's science resource center and Angelo Giugliano's math department program were shining examples of how meaningful individualization could take place in a large and largely traditional high school, most of us condemned the innovations as drool. We were forced to man centers and provide study packets and so forth. But these changes took place mechanically and without enthusiasm. That is to say, they really didn't take place at all. The school, to paraphrase Dorothy Parker, ran the innovative gamut "from A to B."

What was missing was both the individual and the social consciousness required for fundamental change. It's just not easy to articulate the ideal in terms of the approachably realistic. And we can look to the resistance, among teachers as well as among longshoremen, to even consider the ideal, so fraught with difficulty, while the status quo is so comfortable.

The time came when our administration declared its most radical step. The 1,500 students and eighty teachers were to divide themselves into thirteen substantially autonomous mini-schools. The rug of comfort was pulled from under our feet. The status quo was over. Yet, ironically, most of the planned mini-schools sought only to be small replicas of a traditional school.

If we knew anything, when the five of us met at Bill's house, it was that we wanted something different. We had no idea at all of any "learning as a community" concept, but we did all feel that a mini-school should be very different from the norm.

"Let's really start from scratch," Dave said, "and not just patch up an outmoded system on a small scale."

Fine. Except we didn't even know, for sure, if we wanted to work with each other yet. The meeting of the five of us was hastily planned, and if we were ostensibly supposed to wax educationally and philosophically, we were also trying to find out if we were going to get along. Naturally, as hour moved to hour, as tea was replaced by beer, there was lots of:

"Not another pun, Jack. I'm not sure if I can take all those jokes day after day."

"Well, Bill, I'm not sure how many physics I can take."

"Oh, no. He did it again."

"Come on, Dave, we don't have to be serious all the time."

Through it all, though, we did discover that if we did have very different personalities, we shared similar educational instincts and dreams. Each of us had interests that were as important as, if not more important than, our

certified fields of study. These other interests had always joined with and permeated the subject classes we taught. Our feeling that classes could be less restrictive and more akin to the real world extended even to our self-image as teachers. We rejected being looked upon as authorities dispensing knowledge. We had always sought something more than just instructor-pupil relationships. We had, it seemed, a willingness to be vulnerable as human beings with our students.

We do not intend to imply that we are special. The yearning to make education more humanistic lives in the hearts of probably a majority of teachers—as surely as compassion burned in the guts of Terry Molloy. The restraints of schools and society unfortunately shackle these feelings. Unique in our experience has been the chance to unlock these forces and allow them to shape the concept of a new kind of school—a Learning Community. The Learning Community was built on these feelings. It thrives on these feelings. It promotes these feelings.

And even at that first meeting of ours, feelings and imagination were in charge. This imagination had a certain Wordsworthian childlike freedom about it. For although it was rooted in an aggregate of thirty years of teaching, it was unfettered and unclouded by any great knowledge of educational theory except that revealed in graduate education courses taken under the pain of not being certified. Not until the Learning Community was a *fait accompli* did we begin any research and find, to our surprise, that we were practicing what scholars had been suggesting in all those courses we had never taken.

It is not hard to imagine what happened at our first meeting. Each of us had a pet suggestion for this "dream school." But concentrating on details before we had concentrated on the essence was chaotic.

The variance of our individual personalities echoed loud and clear with each new suggestion and our preliminary discussion of the notion of community was no exception:

"Wouldn't it be a good idea to try to create a

community atmosphere for our students since we're going to be so small?"

"Bill, I think you've been working in too many of those encounter groups. Community!"

"No, Jack," added Dave, "I've experienced community —the religious kind anyway—and it's worth trying to achieve."

"I don't know. With your religious background, I imagine that you feel it's still a workable idea. But it sounds like an awfully clichéd and tired concept to me."

"You're right Jack," Angelo said. "Besides how are we to create a Community on a nine to three basis?"

"Well, wait a minute." John chimed in. "I agree it's kind of pretentious to talk about 'community,' especially when the literature I've been teaching is loaded with examples of kinds of communities that have failed. But Dave may have something. We've all experienced individual small-scale expressions of community, so why can't we just try to generate some of that feeling while we're in school and see where it takes us?"

"Maybe that's all we can do. But I agree with Dave that community can still be experienced on a more intense level. There is all the biological evidence in the world showing that man's struggle is a struggle *for community*." Bill continued his argument with all the rough edges of its spontaneity glitteringly apparent. It was convincing enough, however, to cause us all to rethink the "tired before tried" notion that kept reappearing in the discussion.

Bill's argument in full force, as he later prepared it for a theme seminar, gives eloquent support to the Learning Community's fundamental social principle. And its blending of the scientific and the humanistic is no small proof of the possibilities of the interdisciplinary approach. Therefore:

"Billions of years ago in a primordial sea, Nature began selecting size as a biological characteristic having survival value. The larger the life form, the more difficult for it to be eaten and the easier for it to consume food. The single-celled creatures grew as large as they could, but the complex life

functions required in one cell limited the absolute size to the order of magnitude of a present-day paramecium.

"But a much more fascinating experiment was in progress. Multi-cellular organisms were forming where sufficient communication and interaction were developed between individual cells. These organisms functioned as units, yet the cells retained individuality enough to perform separately all the necessary life activities for their own distinct existences. This adaptation proved so successful that multi-cellular life forms became the dominant species on the planet by evolving still more sophisticated variations such as cell specialization.

"As life developed into more and more complex forms, communities of organisms began to parallel the evolution that their cell brothers had embarked on years before. Simple organisms such as certain insects seem to have been able to trade off much of their individuality in order to have the community, a sort of 'superorganism,' behave as a unit. Bees and some ants have been very successful at this. In other species the trade-off is not as great. In any case, as the complexity (especially neurological) of an individual organism increases, the need for the community to recognize this individuality also increases. Hunting dogs depend for their survival on a close-knit community, but their intelligence prohibits their cooperating on the level of a beehive. Yet, when observed in the wild, the dogs' acceptance of individual behavior is manifest especially in the patterns of dominance.

"If study of our monkey relatives as well as archeological and anthropological evidence is any indication, the need of our species for community is fairly great, but must be balanced by a respect for the individuality of a very complex animal.

"A Learning Community is *bio-logical*. As with all life forms, the success of our species depends, in large part, on the delicate balance struck between community and individuality."

But that firm, clarified explanation was a long way

down the road from our early baby steps toward the Learning Community. It was late in that first meeting when someone finally suggested that we shelve the philosophy of community for a while.

"If we're going to be a school, let's deal with a school's most indigenous quality: academics."

And we found in this realm our first and most basic agreement. Our mini-school would undertake, on a full scale, to implement the concept that our personalities and experiences and modes of teaching most reflected: the interdisciplinary style. It became clear that our chief academic function should be to help our students experience the world as one. The ideas rushed forth:

"An interdisciplinary course in which the entire mini-school can study one idea . . ."

"We can coordinate arts and sciences skills courses since there are only five of us . . ."

"Each of us should be an advisor to a fifth of the students to monitor each kid's total curriculum . . ."

"We can teach not just our certified subjects but whatever interests us . . ."

All of these goals, idealistic thoughts under the old system, became realistic dreams. They and dozens like them all materialized and are alive and well now in the Learning Community.

These academic goals demanded the positive interaction of people. All of a sudden, things became clear. Our earlier conversation had not been an idle waste of time. We were heading toward a small, varied community of students and teachers working together to fulfill each individual's aims for a high school education. We started calling ourselves The Learning Community.

Learning and community foster each other. Together they nurture each individual. We dedicated ourselves to the spirit of breaking barriers of knowledge by breaking barriers among people.

We were not out to create a non-school. The Learning Community would provide a high school education with all

the *sine qua non* inherent in such an institution. However, such realities can be adapted and redirected—not merely for the sake of change, but as the means to a vitally new and effective education.

Non-numerical grading and independent study are not, in themselves, good education. But as partial causes of the effect of community learning, they are significant. Conversely, unscheduled time and redefinition of roles are not bad education. But unless they contribute to community learning, their efficacy is reduced.

Having locked onto the criterion for accepting or rejecting structural details of the Learning Community, we were able to prepare a mock-up of why and how the Community would operate. Feeling we were on theoretically sound ground, we invited students to react to our proposals.

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Chapter Two

CREATING COMMUNITY

A school is good when teachers forego their role as sole authority figures, view themselves as learners, and try to develop the idea of a learning community in which the teacher functions more as a coordinator or facilitator of activities than a dictator.

Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, *The School Book* [2]

It was as apparent to us, as it is to Postman and Weingartner, that the formation of a true school community depends upon the realignment of teacher and student roles. And, conversely, such role reformation inexorably leads away from traditional educational structures. The attempt to denazify school by placing teacher-student relationships on a more human basis is not limited to community learning. But it is nowhere as crucial as in a Learning Community.

The traps, however, are everywhere. It is not easy for anyone to relinquish power—in business, in politics or in education. Teachers and administrators usually have certain goals they want their students to reach and fear yielding any control over the push toward those goals. Even the educator who is secure enough to have made the granting of student freedom and choice one of his aims can be so overzealous in his idealism as to enforce role changes and demand student "independence." He has in fact tyrannized democracy. To order students to "Call me by my first name" or "Come up with a syllabus you want and get it in no later than Monday" or "Be creative" may seem comical, but it happens—easily. The end result of such absurdity is the kind of illusory change we discussed in the first chapter. A benevolent despotism is still despotism. The path toward the institutionalization of student freedom is a narrow one. It may be that a concerted effort to "redefine" roles is itself a mistake. "Definition" is a very final process. Student and teacher roles must remain loose and *un*defined enough to allow growth and cooperation wherever and whenever they may flourish.

Obviously, then, at our first meeting with students, we had to be careful not to present the Learning Community as a *fait accompli* but rather to make it clear, more by our demeanor than by dictum, that the Community would develop freely.

The meeting, held after school in the physics lab, was open to everyone, although, of course, we personally sought out students we knew would be receptive to our proposed experiment. About thirty students finally attended.

Controlled chaos prevailed. The open forum technique produced as many wild suggestions as had been voiced at our own first session:

"Can we call you by your first names?"

"You can call us whatever you want."

"What if I don't want to take a certain subject. Do I have to? I'm really sick of Spanish."

"One of us will be your advisor. You and he will talk about your interests, your abilities, what the state requires, what you need to graduate. But the final decision has to be yours."

"Why do we have to take anything?"

"It'll be mighty boring if you don't. To be a community is to do some learning together. And if nothing that's going on interests you, it will be up to you to provide some things that do."

"Are we gonna have study packets?"

"Only if it makes sense in a particular course."

"How big is this going to be? If it's supposed to be a community, it shouldn't be too big, right?"

"Right."

"Is there gonna be any photography . . . music . . . film . . . ?"

"Well, we on the faculty can't do everything. How about you?"

"Yeah. And we can put out our own newspaper and yearbook. And start a farm out back."

"How are we gonna be picked? Marks?"

"What do you think?"

"Marks shouldn't matter that much. Though I guess you gotta look at them. What should matter is if we're serious or if we just want to see if we can goof off. A lot of us get lousy marks 'cause we hate our classes."

Our proposals were somewhat modified, although fundamentally they remained the same. Decisions are not easily made at such meetings. What was born, however, was the dawning of real interaction among all of us. A feeling of specialness, closeness and trust was building. Community

spirit dawned. And although the students still relied on us for final decisions (despite our protestations, we knew that it would take time for students to have the confidence in their ability to steer their school), they did begin to realize that *they* would have a say and an active role in the development and operation of the Learning Community.

In addition, they left with the apostolic mission of recruiting applicants. Some students left never to return. A Learning Community is not for every student—only for every student who believes in and understands its philosophy and who wants to participate in it.

The application for entrance into the Learning Community is now, of course, more sophisticated, but the crucial and deciding part remains as it was at the beginning: "Why do you want to join the Learning Community?" Printed below are some of the actual responses from our early members:

"I have two reasons. I am tired of going through classes like a zombie without caring. The idea of having to be at class by the bells bothered me. Also, I like the idea of being in a community (small). The classes offered here are what I want."

"I want to get out of the school system I've known for ten years. Living in a megalopolis like New York, it's a good feeling to know you have, or try to have, a friendly atmosphere with 125 students."

"I don't want to be monopolized by one teacher's opinion. In the Community I will be having six teachers' ideas plus the ideas of the students in the Learning Community."

"My reason for joining the Learning Community is for a change. In the regular school you know the same people and the system of learning is the same. You get into a rut very easily. In the Community the learning atmosphere will be

more relaxed and I'll be able to get help if I have any problems. Also, people will make an effort to get to know each other and this gives a real feeling of people being together."

"I work better in a group situation. I don't like to be pushed into things because I don't learn that way. All I do is memorize until a test and then forget everything. In the Community, I think I'll be able to learn in my own way and at my own speed."

"I want to join the Learning Community because I want to finally learn something in school. For three years I've just been going to classes, cramming for tests and forgetting things right away. There couldn't be anything worse than what I've been doing. In the Community, the teachers seem to care. Courses seem interesting and it's not as structured as the big school. I don't want to believe that there's no way to learn in high school. I believe that this is the way I'll finally get a chance to learn and understand and hate school less and less."

"I want to join the Learning Community because I feel it is really a good move to make. I would like to be on a more individual basis with all the teachers, to really feel the school is doing something for me. I like to work at my own pace. Many times my classes are so boring because the teacher has to keep explaining the same thing over and over so everybody will understand. In the Community, it seems people will go out of their way to try to work things out as you want. This is the kind of school I would like to belong to. Notice I said belong to and not go to. There seems to be more spirit among the people joining the Learning Community than where I am now. A spirit of each other."

"When I found out about the experimental Learning Community I was stunned. It was a joyous occasion for me since I knew many a door would be opened in all forms of

learning. That day a few friends and I decided to drop by and find out what the Community was really about. It seemed as if there could be a real understanding and friendship between students and teachers. That afternoon, as I sat in the warm grass at the park with my faithful Saint Bernard, I thought of the fun and great opportunities awaiting me. And I decided to take a whack at it."

Almost any human answer was accepted. Grammar didn't matter; neither did sophistication. What was important was that the question was asked and an answer given. A sense of community was and is the only criterion for entrance into the Community. We certainly didn't want to limit our membership to only certain kinds of students. We wanted to avoid being an honor community or a jock community or a hippie community or whatever. The requirements were the same as they are for any community of people as opposed to a select sect: can we live together toward humanistic ends? Only through personal meetings and interviews in support of the preliminary application can these decisions be made. And vastly more often than not, the final decision, either negative or positive, is a mutual one.

Ours is clearly a very subjective system of selection. With the additional pressure of time deadlines, there is always the possibility of misjudgment and unhappiness. But we believe that anything more specific than this rule of thumb, anything more statistically objective, would do violence to the concept of community.

Even if a student, feigning devotion to the ideal but in fact intending to take advantage of the system, were accepted, we would not be overly worried. If we were right in our judgments in the majority of cases and a true sense of community developed, we are convinced that its power would be contagious and exert its influence on the not-so-willing. That's the built-in mechanism that often operates beneficially in the Learning Community without any artificial aid from the faculty. That's (dare we use the

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phrase) peer pressure.

In the space of a month, we organized the students into advisor groups, reviewed cumulative records, finalized scheduling plans, and presented a week of orientation in June, the prime function of which was to remind each other continually that we were seeking to build a Community. The Learning Community depends a lot on self-fulfilling prophecy.

At orientation, the students were requested to think about mini-courses they might eventually like to teach or attend. As a body, we decided on the topic for the first interdisciplinary community theme. The students got to know each other, at least in a superficial way, and they were given the faculty's phone numbers and addresses in case doubts about the Community arose during the long summer.

We, as a faculty, continued debating the mechanics of the community theme, what students would do in their unscheduled time, how we would evaluate students, and how the hell five teachers could teach 123 students anyway. In short, we created a school and worked at those nagging problems, the solutions to which are contained in the chapters of this volume.

We had come face to face with the challenge of creating in practice what had sounded so fine on paper. The weight of even picayune problems, let alone critical ones, under the pressure of our fears and dreams continually tested our own embryonic community spirit. We openly declared that among our other duties was one of extreme importance: we would have to bring each other up when disappointments or arguments or criticism brought us down. And there were plenty of each. We had an idea and a feeling that we were after something so exciting and so unique that nothing short of total disaster should dissuade us. After all, we had twelve other mini-schools to compare ourselves with. Soon, we had to test our beliefs against theirs.

The principal of our high school was dismissed and a new man hired who declared that only one pilot mini-school would be permitted to exist. We contended that the chosen

mini-school should be a viable alternative to the main school rather than a miniaturization of it. Our logic was triumphant. We were granted the opportunity to prove that a Learning Community could reveal the Emersonian "secret of Education": "I believe that our own experience instructs us that the secret of Education lies in respecting the pupil. It is not for you to choose what he shall know, what he shall do. It is chosen and foreordained, and he only holds the keys to his own secret. By your tampering and thwarting and too much governing he may be hindered from his end and kept out of his own. Respect the child."

Although the particular circumstances surrounding our becoming the sole mini-school were unique, we are like most alternative programs in being an exception amid a larger and more traditional school. Such a position is the source of a specialness which enhances community spirit. When our students returned in September to learn that their school was so highly regarded, they felt an enormous pride and excitement and—yes—a superiority which we have found worth exploiting throughout the year. A Learning Community is, in Charles Silberman's phrase, "less a method than a set of shared attitudes and convictions." [3]

The locus for most of the reinforcement of our attitudes and convictions as well as for the spontaneous dissecting and discussion of our program is the advisor group. It is the grass roots of the Community.

Attendance and emergency cards and money collection do take place in the daily fifteen minutes and the additional Thursday afternoon hour and a half of advisor groups. But an advisor session is more than just a home room. It is where the process of community is most made manifest—on an extraordinarily simple and sensible level. The advisor gets to know his advisees. He is responsible for a file on the total achievement of each of his students. More importantly, he is responsible for the acclimation of his advisees to the society and academics of the Learning Community. Thus, the advisor group is sometimes a bull session, sometimes a guidance lesson, sometimes an informal town meeting at

which students react to, complain about and make suggestions for the Community.

The advisor group is the state in the federal system of the Community—but in a highly personal and direct way. When an advisor group discusses an issue with their advisor, they are also talking with one of their subject teachers, an administrator, their guidance counselor, their friend. There is no bureaucracy. There is no need of a representative student government. The democracy is direct. Student suggestions and complaints can immediately be discussed among the teachers and among other advisor groups for possible action.

Are student desires ever overruled? Of course. We do have certain responsibilities and articles of faith which cannot be compromised. If there is a question of student safety or the well-being of the Community as a whole, we respect prudence over democracy.

And there is a further restriction on democracy at the Learning Community. As a special Education U.S.A. report has discerned, "A danger exists that alternative schools may be too democratic for their own good, with every little decision being referred to a committee and no one prepared to take final responsibility."[4] The faculty of the Community takes all final responsibility. However, our decision to remain co-equal without a director and our commitment to student decision-making can threaten efficiency. To be constantly discussing and voting on when the dance will be held or what color the paint for home base should be or what movies to rent would leave little time for education. We once spent hours and hours deciding where a field day should be held. It was hardly worth it. It is much better, on picayune matters, to declare, "We're going to Bear Mountain on May 3." Everyone, rest assured, will want to go. And those who prefer another spot will arrange, at another time, another trip to the Catskills. Among the faculty, each of us has assumed over the years those tasks and chores and areas of decision which are most adaptable to his skills and talents. One of us prepares written materials; another deals with the

school administration; another schedules; another oversees finances; etc.

What is scrupulously avoided in all these possibilities is to respond to a colleague or student, when an individual's decision is challenged, with "Because I say so." In the Community, such a statement is meaningless. All decisions, no matter how irrevocable, must be explained. The decision-maker must not be insulated but has to be willing to put his logic and beliefs to the Community's scrutiny.

Aside from its political side, the advisor group exists to allow a personal relationship to develop between each student and his advisor. The exchanging of phone numbers or the availability of the advisor to meet with a student at any time is vital.

If the advisor group doesn't work, the Learning Community will not. If students are to feel a direct relationship with teachers and if they are to feel real control over their destinies, they must begin to feel so in the advisor group.

It takes time getting used to being called at midnight with an "Uh, listen, I hope you aren't asleep but I can't finish that short story . . ."

Or being greeted at 8:30 A.M. with a dozen students declaring, "We've been talking about that written test for the Community theme and we think it's an unnecessary waste of time and we want a meeting . . ."

But we did get used to it and are never more proud of the Community than at such moments. The intimacy sometimes provokes bothersome incidents, sometimes enlightening ones. Always, however, it reflects a measure of an advisee's growth as an individual and as a student.

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Chapter Three

THE MAKING OF THE OPEN SECONDARY CLASSROOM

The placement of objects in space is not arbitrary and rooms represent in physical form the spirit and soul of places and institutions.

Herbert R. Kohl, *The Open Classroom* [5]

"What do you mean 'personal offense' if I talk to you high?"

"Look. All I'm saying is that for two months I thought I was talking to Frank. But it's not you I'm talking to if you're smoking grass in the bathroom."

"Wait a minute, Mr. A. Everybody does it, you know."

"He's crazy," said Joe looking up from his quadratic equations, "not everybody at all. Just the same group all the time."

Frank continued undaunted, "You expect us to change? We've been getting stoned in school since freshman year."

"No, we don't expect miracles."

"But," added another teacher interrupting a conference with his creative writing students, "we can and do expect some honesty."

"I am being honest. I'm admitting what I do."

"We know. And we really appreciate it and admire your trust. But I'm talking about long-range honesty."

"Right," spoke up Maureen banging the lab table at which she was doing her assigned experiment. "We founded this thing together—on an honest basis. It's really important."

"What the hell are you talking about?" asked Tommy.

"This. We can't have an honest community—people really dealing with each other—if we're half-stoned and half-straight."

"Tommy, what would you think if I came in and taught stoned?"

"Wouldn't bother me."

"Oh, wait a minute, Tom," Al said. "That's not true. You couldn't teach stoned. You've got to be in more control."

"And you?"

"It's not the same."

"But it is. If we're after community here, we have got to be on as equal and communicative a plane as possible."

"Oh, damn," said Gary, "this project can wait. I've got to say something. Look, I get stoned in school sometimes but I think you're right. It might really hurt the Community."

"Why do you get stoned in school?"

"I enjoy it. I don't think it really hurts my work. But I never really thought about this honesty—this community thing about it."

"Getting stoned is kind of selfish, isn't it? Oh sure, you can groove with your friends if you're all high. But even then you're hearing and talking in very individual ways. You're into your own head. There's no way we'll have a Community like that—unless we all get stoned."

"That sounds good."

"I was being facetious as you well know. Remember this whole discussion started in class before we came down here to home base. This is not just any kind of community. This is a Learning Community."

"Look, I'm not trying to make any judgments about getting stoned or getting drunk. All I'm saying—and I'm really clear on this—is that the Community won't work that way."

"Wow, that was strange," Frank said. "But I'm really glad we're getting all of this out now."

And we did. Until six o'clock, about half the Community sat around home base room arguing. What had begun as an English class developed into one of the most important learning experiences of our first year. It was an event that had profound effects on our understanding of community spirit and on our dealings with the particular problem of getting high in school. Additionally, it dramatically brought to light the importance of the home base room.

Early in the development of the Learning Community, it became clear that the large room on the ground floor was evolving into much more than just a big classroom.

On a day during the summer prior to our opening, a group of teachers and students graciously accepted the offer of the First National City Bank to clear out its downtown warehouse of all the old furniture we and our rent-a-truck could carry.

The decor of the home base, a reconverted language lab,

depended more upon what we could beg and borrow than on the ideal open classroom pictured in the fancier educational journals and brochures. With a budget as miniscule as ours, "scrounge" is the operating principle. Money is unimportant in the face of the spirit engendered as students and teachers bring in rugs and paint and other odds and ends to literally build their own school. It is important for everyone to feel a part of the physical planning of a Community as well as the academic. With a mind's eye looking back to the awesome pioneer spirit when communities built their schools with their own hands and sweat, we molded our small wing of the school building into as useful and comfortable an area —looking as little like a school—as our energy, imagination and resources allowed.

Our original plans for a community room (which would eventually come to be known as the home base) were vague at best. We knew we needed a big bulletin board for the theme announcements; we wanted a place for teachers to meet with students; the three teachers who had experience in subject resource centers expected to carry over the best aspects of those; and we needed a place for students to gather when they were not in class.

Although we knew, even then, that community could not exist constantly separated into classes and advisor groups but demanded a central meeting place, still we debated whether our large room would better serve by housing additional subject classes instead of being open and fundamentally unscheduled.

We decided to leave the home base sacrosanct. It was one of our more serendipitous decisions. The Community's health and survival is rooted in that central physical location, providing, as it does, all the comforts and resources to make communication across subject areas possible. And it makes possible the kind of event described at the beginning of this chapter. But such an incident is not the norm. There is no norm unless ceaseless variety is a norm. The home base takes on a life of its own reflecting the concerns of the Community. Its development—its facets, its departments, its

activities—has been organic, growing from the needs and interests of its inhabitants rather than as ordained ahead of time.

What we stumbled on is a secondary school adaptation of the "open classroom." Obviously, this stumbling was unconsciously predetermined by the philosophy and structures already inherent in the Learning Community idea. There can be no Community without a community room. There can be no constancy of interdisciplinary study unless there is a place where students and teachers have the opportunity to eavesdrop and even join in on what their colleagues are up to. There can be no coordinated interdisciplinary community theme without an open room in which the arts and science of a subject area can be discussed and aligned. And if teachers are to be more advisors and resources, there must be the visible, tangible and continuous cooperation between them and their students without restrictions of time or topic.

In keeping with this commitment, we evacuated the private top-floor compound of faculty offices and moved our desks into home base. All our "free time" was to be spent there. Free time for us, as for our students, evaporated into the much more self-renewing and relaxing communication of an open room. Our desks became no more sacred or private than any other home base resource. It is surprising how easily a teacher gets used to spotting a mark book under three needlepoint patterns, a Scrabble board, the *Collected Short Stories of Hemingway*, a Petri dish and a Skinner box.

The home base has become a catch-all for activities both planned and spontaneous, academic and non-academic, necessary and superfluous. As a result, home base is almost self-motivating. It is *the* place to be. Innate curiosity is, more often than not, the principle behind the interaction of people and disciplines.

A student's schedule allows him a good deal of time to spend in home base. When not in class, students are expected to be in the library, our outside garden or in home base—often for designated meetings, conferences,

assignments, projects, but, as often, to poke around with the rest of the Community.

What can happen? Bill comes to home base to discuss his recently completed essay with his English teacher. Another student in the same class is hanging around the teacher's desk trying to do some homework, overhears the conversation, realizes they are discussing a problem he shares and joins in the discussion. A group of students are building a model of Walden Two for their theme project and are turned on to a film being previewed by the biology teacher. Students completing their work at the portable physics lab are recruited to write an article on their experiment for the Community newspaper. A teacher-student conference on religion breaks out into open debate, attracting the busy and non-busy alike. A student asks a group splicing together a Learning Community publicity film what the hell they're doing. Students discuss the shopping list and plans for rearranging home base in preparation for the Community dinner to be held that night. A teacher adds that he'll make the Caesar's salad.

The evidence is endless. Most impressive to many are the ways in which the availability of home base makes learning more personal and more effective. A writing teacher no longer has to uselessly return red-pencilled essays but can meet with each of his students individually on a regular basis to work over and discuss and correct assignments. Other teachers in the arts use the conference technique in lieu of more mechanical means of checking progress. The science teacher, instead of giving minimal attention to each of ten groups in a large lab, schedules three students at a single lab area according to their free time with either the teacher or an experienced student available in home base to help with problems.

The home base is a valuable barometer of the health of the Community. When the room is bustling, all is well.

In judging the operation of home base, we must force ourselves to be as open-minded in practice as we are in theory about the Learning Community. It took a long while

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to feel comfortable doing academic work with one student when others were playing chess or talking about an upcoming rock concert. And although we on the faculty, from the beginning, felt privileged to sit in with our students on non-academic raps and games and activities, we did not easily shed the guilt inculcated by the puritan schoolwork ethic. But we resisted our fears especially, oddly enough, when they most surfaced—upon the visit of an administrator whose furrowed eyebrow bespoke his doubts as to "what the hell *educational* is going on here?"

Our defense mechanisms triggered, we again and again went into verbal barrages to convince our visitor, and ourselves, of what we really do know and have seen to be the truth: the conventional notion of what is educational is out of joint; unless the room is structured for choice, for spontaneity, for informality, for variety, and for a good deal of disorder, chances that a student will *choose* and *enjoy* and *seek out* learning are reduced; if a school can more nearly reproduce the kind of environment students live in when they're *not* in school—where they learn most of what they know—education has a better chance; and that socialization, even in "non-academic" areas, is a good in itself.

Even if our guests remain unconvinced, we are renewed and recommit ourselves to the dicta of Beatrice and Ronald Gross: "The teachers begin with the assumption that the children want to learn and will learn in their fashion; learning is rooted in first-hand experience so that teaching becomes the encouragement and enhancement of each child's own thrust toward mastery and understanding. Respect for and trust in the child are perhaps the most basic principles underlying the open classroom."[6]

Unlike a visitor to the home base, we see the whole picture five long days a week and know that student for student, pound for pound, idea for idea, there is more "education," academic and non-academic, going on in the Learning Community than we have ever seen in any other school.

But there are valleys. And it is important for us and our

students to detect them. When things slow down, when more students than usual lounge in cliques, when ruts are developing, it's time to consciously foster new activities or to discuss in advisor groups the creeping malaise and how to combat it. It is reassuring and comforting not to have to keep such problems as "top secret faculty business" or to plot clever means of motivation. A Community problem is Community business and is therefore open for general discussion and solution. If that all-important Community spirit has been genuinely aroused, success will be everyone's goal.

It is that same pressure, equally and universally felt, to make the Learning Community operate at its potential that obviates the need for explicit rules in home base. A research study involving 1,600 students in a senior high school has concluded that "when students were allowed time and place to 'get away' from the constant pressure of attending class and studying or working toward a class assignment, they generally proved to act responsibly and did not tend to take unfair advantage of the opportunity given them."[7] We have found it very much similar. If home base has regulations, they are the unspoken but understood ones of the British Infant School: "No destroying equipment. No destroying or interfering with the work, play or activities of other children."

Naturally, the home base is not conflict free. People do get on each other's nerves; people do not get along with everybody; people can be selfish; community does not imply utopia.

Consider the problem of one radio for one hundred and fifty students. Paul, a black student who had joined the Community after ten years of experience hating school, whites, authority and teachers, immediately claimed control of the radio and had no compunction upon entering home base in switching the dial—no matter who was listening to what—to the local soul station, increasing the volume to decibel levels the Grateful Dead would disavow. We had no quick clever solution nor do we have one now except to allow

the pressure and spirit of community work its will. For weeks there were requests, pleading, arguments and even screaming matches. Although classical tenets of teacher demeanor might prescribe otherwise, we too often act as our emotions demand.

We had to maintain the "do not overly disturb" motif of home base, but, true to the principle of community, we did not want Paul ostracized or made a pariah.

Paul, of course, was having trouble adjusting to other aspects of Community life as well. All the machinery of the Community was activated from advisor group discussions about home base in general to private conversations with Paul or with other students about the specific problem. There was no sudden solution. The crisis eased as Paul and the others realized we weren't about to expel Paul or impound the radio. We were all going to have to work it out together. The Community responded.

As Paul grew to understand he couldn't turn off our attentiveness or alienate all the students and that he wasn't going to be thrown out of the Community and as his colleagues grew to realize they would have to approach Paul and deal with him, we began to hear:

"Hey Paul, is that James Brown? He's okay."

"Yeah. You want it louder?" A smile.

"I don't like it that much."

"You want it off, right?"

"No. Just a little lower, okay?"

"Okay."

It is sometimes frightening to have to be so vague in an approach to problems. Yet these procedures are at the heart of the Learning Community. They are the best expression of our faith in the power of community. It does work. Our faith is rewarded in that the confrontation and anguish over our crises allows the Community to feel its own power. And, thus, it is further strengthened.

Chapter Four

READIN', 'RITIN', AND 'RITHMETIC IN COMMUNITY

When I think back
On all the crap
I learned in high school
It's a wonder
I can think at all

Paul Simon, *"Kodachrome"* [8]

One way of looking at the history of the human group is that it has been a continuing struggle against the veneration of crap.

Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* [9]

An early and essential task in establishing any alternate school program is the detection and prevention of the infiltration of crap from the planned curriculum. Everyone, including ourselves, can empathize with Paul Simon's memory. Yet educational crap is a subjective and sometime thing with many causes.

Crap can be the personally irrelevant. A student's questioning of the Pythagorean Theorem in terms of "Why do I have to learn this crap?" may be better answered *for him* with a "You're right" than the instinctive defensive statement of a math teacher such as "It's important if you want to build a triangular table" or "It's an exercise in thinking." For some students those answers might be enough; for others, they come off as further evidence of crap in school.

Certainly, debate as to the relevance, the beauty, the majesty of the content of a course is valuable, for it may well allow a student to be turned on to something he had no interest in before. A naiveté in one's open-mindedness—the easy acceptance of a student's whim to be disinterested—is as appalling as the stock explanations of "why we study" or the firm belief that all humanity should be awed by what a teacher finds awesome.

Fact offers another common category of crap. A heavy reliance on the teaching of facts in any given subject is the best path to a crappy course. When Paul Simon was in high school, he learned that Columbus discovered America, that the Maoist regime was not the real government of China, that man was the only animal to make tools. It hasn't been that long. Not one of those "facts" appears to be true today. Aside from their impermanence, facts accumulate at astonishing rates. Ninety percent of everything known in 1980 will have been discovered in the 1970's. Michael A. McDanield notes the dilemma of "overchoice . . . for the designer of educational curriculum in social studies: there is so much that *could* be taught that it is almost impossible to decide what *should* be taught."[10] To predetermine what data should be taught is, we concur, impossible. The

"way" for which McDanield yearns has become for us the making of skills courses concept-oriented. It is on concepts that our courses focus. Facts become evidence and example and "cultural reference points" (in Alvin Toffler's phrase) in the dialogues on concepts. Skills courses are adventures in thinking, creating, adapting and understanding rather than daily mnemonic chores. If successful, they prepare students to deal with whatever facts crop up, fade away or come into being in an ever-changing world.

Personal irrelevance and fact are dangerous. The most notorious cause of crap, however, is crappy method and approach. Conversely, viable teaching methodology can vitiate the crap-creating tendencies of content. One would be hard pressed to claim that writing is an irrelevant skill or that it is a fact-dominated subject. Yet, a dry, formal approach to the teaching of English can make it as crappy as the most irrelevant of factual courses.

It was our intention to reflect, in the scheduling, the selection and the operation of each class of each course, all the spirit and verve and joy infused into the Community at large.

Our obsession with the detection and elimination of crap is not at all at odds with our strong commitment to a rigorous program of academics. To simultaneously devote ourselves to skills and the expunging of crap is to present academic courses as exciting, worthwhile and important, rather than as a matter of rote.

It is important for students to be part of crap detection. If they believe that we want to eschew crap and if they believe that we want their own analysis of what they're learning, students will have more trust in our decisions as to what we feel is educationally necessary.

As idyllic as the Learning Community may be at any given moment, it has a serious purpose. Some of our colleagues in the main school find this hard to believe. One even told us that our students couldn't be learning, "they're too happy." Nonetheless, we strongly agree with National School Public Relations Association that "in order to survive,

an alternative school, like traditional schools and free schools, must demonstrate that it does not overlook the teaching of basic skills. If alternative schools overlook the essentials in their enthusiasm for the novel, parents and students may rightly turn elsewhere. . . . Whatever philosophy and approach an alternative school uses, it should be certain that its students are learning the more difficult skills as well as the easier ones." [1]

No matter how many varied kinds of successes we have had in our experience, unless we are able to say, "Students learn more and better in the Learning Community," we are not satisfied.

Our criteria for the determination of what skills a Community student should master are not necessarily congruent with those of the state or our high school administration. The Learning Community does adhere to the statutory requirements of New York inasmuch as our students earn the stipulated number of credits in designated fields of study. We have never bothered to rebel against these requirements. They're harmless enough. As long as we continue to have the leeway to grant English credit for a Bob Dylan mini-course and American History credit for a community theme on Urban Man, the mandated requirements are little more than secretarial concerns or, at most, added considerations for students as they plan their schedules.

We suppose that the intention of the formers of core curriculum requirements was to turn out the "well-rounded" student. We share that noble goal but find it more beneficial to incorporate interdisciplinary matter in as many courses as possible rather than to demand that students spend certain numbers of hours in subject-segregated classes.

Skills courses in the Learning Community are designed to respond to the needs of students in terms of their maturation as people and their success in college or career. They are broad enough in content to insure heterogeneous student groupings and to allow for interdisciplinary additions to the syllabus. Yet, they are narrow enough so that each

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student will be aware of the material he will be expected to master during the course, and thus he can judge whether he wants or needs the class.

Clearly, there are parallels to the traditional battery of required courses. We are not, for example, afraid to offer Calculus or Basic Skills of English or Chemistry if they meet the demands of our students or our best judgment as educators of what our students should be exposed to. Skills courses are the most traditional aspects of the Community program since they are constructed to meet the most traditional ends of a high school education.

However, the Community environment has a profound effect on the way in which skills are offered. Skills are required in general for all students, but not in particular. Each student must take three skills and no more than five. The decision as to what he will take is made in consultation with the advisor. Obviously, choices are limited to the array of courses scheduled each semester. That is the operating level of requirement. Even that restrictiveness is tempered by student input into what is given. Skills courses in drama, current events and art and music history all were incorporated into the Community at the request of students who either needed or desired those subjects. Not all such suggestions can be accommodated in the skills schedule. More specific fields of study better serve as mini-courses, as do esoteric subjects. Areas of interest to only one or two students can be provided on an independent basis.

In general, a skills course should offer necessary knowledge for a twentieth-century human and/or appropriate preparation for academic and career opportunities through an understanding of written, oral and visual communication, awareness of one's historical position, an understanding of the mechanics of one's government, experiences in analytic thinking, an awareness of science and technology, and/or vocational skills.

Consider the following course descriptions of a few Learning Community skills courses:

WRITING and CRITICISM: This course should be

considered the average English course that will accommodate all those who wish to improve their writing skills and their ability to criticize all works of art in all fields. The class will be analyzing, in writing, poems, stories, photos, paintings and the like.

CREATIVE WRITING: This course is intended for any student who enjoys writing and intends to do original work over the year. Student writing will provide the basis for the course, although some well-known authors will be used as examples.

BASIC SKILLS OF ENGLISH: This course is designed for students who need or want to brush up on the basics of writing and reading. This is not, however, a course in grammar. Improvement occurs through a process of writing, rewriting, analyzing and a series of appointments with the teacher in addition to class work. Students who have been discouraged or disappointed with their writing are urged to take this course to restore their confidence in their ability to express themselves.

AMERICAN HISTORY: Those who have found history difficult can take this course. The class will use an inquiry approach to the subject. Students will read first-hand accounts of history by people who were there and examine photos, cartoons, songs, etc. Students will compare their own conclusions with those of historians and journalists.

SCIENCE TOPICS: A science course for everyone. The topics to be covered depend on the interests of the class. Some previously investigated were Ecology, Evolution, Astronomy, Nutrition, First Aid, Geology, and Oceanography.

CIVILIZATION: This course traces the artistic movements in music, painting, sculpture and architecture and places them into the historical periods that gave them rise. Examples of music and art will be frequent, as are field trips to the museums and halls housing the originals in New York City. As much as possible, attempts are made to jibe this course with other Learning Community courses in Science, Philosophy, English and History.

In the same semester in which the courses described above were offered, students could choose Philosophy and Literature, Drama Workshop, Conflict and Consensus in American History, Intermediate Algebra, Geometry, Pre-Calculus, College Physics, Chemistry, Theories of Human Behavior and Theism and Atheism in Modern Philosophy.

The importance given to skills is tacitly underscored by their being the most permanent part of the Community schedule. From 9:00 to 11:30 each day, there are three forty-five minute blocks of skills. It may seem terribly old-fashioned to have time limits on classes, but we unashamedly admit that forty-five minutes is usually about as long as a class should go. Also, there must be some system insuring that each skill gets one of our rooms three times a week. In any event, the schedule does not really limit anything. It's not unusual to see a history discussion begin in the hall outside a room as students wait for a calculus class to complete its session. It's liable to be five, ten, or fifteen minutes before a tentative knock dares to interrupt. More importantly, the skills schedule remains flexible and ever within our control to change at an instant. If extra classes or group meetings or student-teacher consultations are needed, they can be called during the day in home base. If a two-hour session is needed for a film or an all-day class for a field trip, that can be arranged too. As much as possible, we try to fit such extensions at times when students are not otherwise occupied. But we are not afraid to schedule conflicts from time to time. If a student must miss a class, he simply fills out an anti-cutting form stating the reason and arranges to meet his teacher in home base to make up what he misses. It's quite easy since we all live together in our Learning Community compound.

Conflicts often occur when a student is taking a course in the main school because the Community doesn't offer it. Since the two schedules vary, conflicts will stagger throughout the week. The main school course is always given priority in terms of student attendance, since it is vastly

easier to keep current with a Community course than one in the main school.

A frequent debate between administrators and the Community faculty surrounds the time students spend in class. "How can a student spending two and a quarter hours in class in the Community course receive the same credit as a main school student who is in each course for more than four hours each week?" we are asked again and again. We try to explain that the two hours and fifteen minutes does not include consultation time, group work, in-school research, library assignments and other out-of-class accouterments to each course. More to the point is our belief that time is hardly the best measurement of a student's relationship to his studies. A student can—and many do—sleep through more than four hours of class each week. The whole idea of skills courses and Learning Community education in general is to engage the student in active learning. It is worthwhile to sacrifice class time in favor of individualized instruction, field trips and supportive modes of education.

Our desire for active engagement militates against the careful timing and rigidity of lesson plans. What teacher, after all, can measure out the life of a course or the development of a concept in coffee spoons without descending into Prufrockian absurdity?

When the Mitchell-Stans trial opened in New York, our American History class forsook their study of the 1920's and studied instead history as it was made in the 1970's. Taking full advantage of the Community's flexibility, the class did not merely discuss newspaper reports or watch a video tape, but, with a quick word to the rest of the faculty, met at the Federal courthouse at 6 A.M. for three days running and attended the trial. They followed this up with class discussions back at the Community. Who can gauge the impact this experience must have had when the class returned to the 1920's and Sacco-Vanzetti and Teapot Dome?

The study of poetry, traditionally a subject with a castor oil appeal, has similarly been enlivened by the students' freedom to deal with verse on their own terms. In a modern poetry class, a student whose major interest had been music set Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" to song and performed it for the class. When Allen Ginsberg appeared locally, another group attended his performance, taped his readings and played them for the rest of the class.

The flexibility of skills courses—and our reliance on student input—can no better be evidenced than in the abrupt and total shift made in our Political Science course at mid-semester. Student interest in the theory of government as presented in the classes waned quickly. Home base and the course itself became forums for the disgruntled students: "We don't want lectures on congresses and committees and administrations. We could read a book and not go to class and learn as much."

Based on student suggestions for adaptation, the class was remodeled into a mini-federal government in which students organized themselves into "congressional committees" and learned about the government by being a government. Nor did they ape reality by "settling" questions of trade and foreign policy, but they worked on the real issues of the Community. Their decisions had a real impact instead of a vicarious one, and they learned about the efficiency and effectiveness of American representative democracy. The new system demanded much more work—most of it on the students' free time—but they were willing to do it. It was their idea.

What a tremendous experience this was for all of us in the Community. Under a more traditional structure, we, as teachers, would have probably felt bitterness in response to student dissatisfaction. Only in a Learning Community where communication is so open and honest, where teachers and students have forsaken their roles as enemies trying to outmaneuver each other, and where teachers are committed to allowing courses to flow, could such friendly rebellion take place.

Another manifestation of our theory of flexibility made real is the ability, the mandate, of each teacher to tackle subjects outside his certified field. In most other school systems, such an occurrence is a burden incurred when an English teacher quits and a history teacher is enlisted to take over because "anyone can teach English." The average administration would rarely, however, entrust teachers with a new or novel course outside his discipline simply because of his eagerness to take a group of students on a learning adventure with him.

In the Learning Community, desire to teach and desire to learn is reason enough to establish a course. Such desire to teach a new skill, provided one is confident and competent as scholar and teacher in his own field, more than compensates for lack of expertise. A teacher's eagerness is contagious in class. Open inquiry is a natural result as students understand that they are engaged in a group learning experience rather than a series of lectures.

Nowhere is true inductive learning more apparent than in the course where the teacher is, in fact, more moderator than oracle, more learner than expert. "Induction" as it is practiced elsewhere is less substance than sham. If a teacher seeks to hear the "right" answer, but lengthens his questioning to forty-five minutes rather than ten seconds, he has not conducted an inductive lesson. When, however, a capable teacher provokes a class along untrod lines, induction does take place.

Consider the Community's founding math teacher whose interest in philosophy had been a hobby, who began to discuss philosophy with students in theme seminars and in home base, who visited religion and literature classes and debated philosophical concepts with students and teachers, who sought to incorporate Aristotelian logic into his geometry course, who along with a growing number of students decided that the Learning Community needed a skills course in philosophy, who made preparation for such a course his summer project, who made the Great Philosophers one of the most exciting Community experiences, and who is

now pursuing a post-graduate degree in philosophy.

No one man can teach everything. And one does not have to be a da Vinci to teach in a Learning Community. We do not consider ourselves Renaissance men. We simply believe that if a teacher has mastered the ability to deal with, lead and guide students and if his classroom technique is competent, then he should exploit his interests and avocations and meld them with the curiosity of his students in new and different areas of study. Teachers must of course be warned against overloading themselves with new courses lest the time and energy expended in self-preparation exhaust them and lessen their ability to be ever on their toes and awake on duty during and beyond the school day. There are no hiding places, no closed door faculty rooms, no prep periods, no sleepy third floor hall duties for the Learning Community teacher.

Most of a teacher's load, therefore, should remain within his primary field of study. Even in these fields, though, the same kind of verve described above can be maintained by allowing each course, at student or teacher suggestion, to delve into areas not endlessly overtaught.

We are hardly endorsing ignorance as the criterion for curriculum. We are unequivocally stating that real group investigation is more valid than mock group investigation. Teachers who have moaned "Oh, no; three classes of freshman English and a slow junior class; I don't think I can face *Tom Sawyer* again" should be freed of that burden. Teacher creativity is essential in fostering student creativity.

Just as teachers are encouraged to bring with them their wide array of interests to enrich classes, students are likewise urged. Student hobbies are another resource in Community academic life. One of our students had set up an elaborate stereo system for the Community's Christmas party. He was quickly recruited by the teacher of Physics to demonstrate and discuss his extensive knowledge of audio-electronics as a lesson. It's quite a natural phenomenon and it is easy to imagine the class' enthusiasm for their colleague's efforts.

Even in terms of evaluation of a student in a course, individuals' talents and interests are taken into account. Skills are not designed to prepare students for exams. In some courses, written and/or oral tests are useful devices for aligning the concepts scattered throughout a term. But an original experiment in the sciences or participation in a social action program in social studies is often vastly more worthwhile. More important than cramming for a test is a student's understanding of how his life or environment is affected by the concepts of a course. A poem can be taught so that a student is forced to memorize it and regurgitate a stanza on a test, or a poem can be taught insofar as its theme and technique are compared to a rock song which a student has memorized not by command but by constant listening. We opt for the second technique.

The style and methods we describe are adaptable in non-Community situations. We are sure that the best teachers have always sought to make their classes crapless. But the Learning Community institutionalizes these possibilities. Its whole structure and philosophy are designed to enhance these changes. The classroom can only ultimately be reinvigorated when it becomes a part and not the totality of education. The classroom has a social and motivational importance, but should become only a tile in the mosaic of a student's life of learning.

We could not better describe our hope for skills courses than by letting a Community student discuss her experience: "Personally, the Community showed me that teachers are people; they deserve respect, but friendship is a possibility. In the Community, I find myself hungry for class, something that I ordinarily dreaded. The Community kindled a curiosity. I learn because I want to know. The Community gives me freedom and responsibility and showed me that you can't have one without the other. As the fire grew within my heart, I saw learning from teachers wasn't the only source of knowledge. Books came before my eyes and a love grew between us. My peers taught me and I them. I saw that

learning wasn't something that happened strictly in a classroom but at every second of life. The world outside is filled with knowledge. It is everywhere, not just in school and not just in the minds of a few. Everyone has something to offer and everything has a mystery about it worth investigating."

Chapter Five

EXPERIENCING THE WORLD AS ONE: THE INTER-DISCIPLINARY COMMUNITY THEME

The world and human experience are one whole. There are no dotted lines in it separating History from Geography or Mathematics from Science or Chemistry from Physics. In fact,* out there, *there are no such things as History or Geography or Chemistry or Physics. Out there is—out there.

John Holt, *Freedom and Beyond* [12]

As crapless, as innovative, as flexible, as interdisciplinary, as alive, as successful, as educational as we believe the Learning Community skills courses are, they are still, for us, more essentials of any high school than emblems of an alternative high school and more adjuncts of a Learning Community than the soul of a Learning Community. It would be quite feasible to operate an educationally sound and somewhat innovative school with just a full schedule of skills courses as we pursue them. But, in our judgment, it would remain fundamentally a good traditional mini-school and "out there" would still be "out there."

The leap from mini-school to Learning Community must be reflected tangibly in a Community course. The same urgency to provide academic essentials in skills courses must arouse the construction of a program dedicated primarily to being community oriented—and to being innovative.

Especially when a school doesn't have the complete freedom to be totally "without walls," innovative experiences are valuable sheerly for the sake of being innovative. Innovation, though, is best served when it is conjoined with other educational goals. For us, they are interdisciplinary study and community spirit. To attempt to bring what's "out there" in, we offer the interdisciplinary community theme.

If learning is to be a truly living experience, the interdependence of subject matter ought to flow naturally. The artificial divisions of the traditional school do not exist "out there." We therefore present themes in which the entire Community can participate. Core readings and ideas are simultaneously examined by students and teachers of different disciplines and interests. One theme is viewed from a host of points of view, each discipline necessary for the other's survival.

The concept of a theme can best be explained by describing at the outset the first one the Learning Community encountered: "The Future of Society." Each student was required to read *Brave New World*, *Walden Two* and *Future Shock*. Every week, the faculty and a varying

group of students formulated sessions (seminars, field trip, lectures, presentations) related to our wide topic to be presented the following Monday through Wednesday afternoons. Fridays were reserved for films of the theme, and on Thursday afternoon advisor sessions were maintained. A bulletin board full of session options was presented to the Community each week, and each week a mad rush of students assaulted the board to sign up for those events that most interested them. There were no permanent rosters or groupings. Different students and teachers followed different paths, constantly mixing and remixing. A student could choose, on the average, six sessions from more than thirty offered each week for eight weeks. As the theme picked up momentum, more students volunteered to be seminar leaders, freeing teachers to do a hefty share of team teaching.

A final week of the theme was set aside for oral examinations and submission of the logs students had to keep and their final projects. Originality and ingenuity are encouraged in the projects. One group of students built a model of a utopian community; others trained a white rat *à la* Skinner; a student wrote a play about the authors of the theme books; another prepared an exhaustive study of Shaw and his vision of the future.

The theme is probably the single most important aspect of Community education. To fully understand its motivation, its excitement, its value, it is necessary to experience it. One student wrote of the theme: "It joins all the students into a family. The future scientists learn from the future artists. The poets-to-be learn from the pre-mathematicians. Each accepts the other's offering of self because each self makes the theme work."

It was just as exciting for us, as teachers, to discuss all the ramifications of a theme such as The Future of Society. We were like kids with a new toy. We were dealing with a topic many of us had referred to in our previously separate classroom. Now we were learning from each other and being mutually stimulated even in the planning of a week of

activities. Among us, as among the students, academics was building, and not distracting from, community spirit.

The first three themes resulted from the insights of the faculty. A theme must be wide enough to sustain eight weeks of study, specific enough to be grasped and mastered by a wide range of students, realistically interdisciplinary, and supportable by available reading and audio-visual materials and field trip possibilities. It is no easy task to decide on an idea which meets all those criteria. Selecting two each year, to alternate with mini-courses, can be awesome.

Our second theme arose at a long agonizing meeting in the middle of December, late on a Friday afternoon. We had tossed around the possibility of doing a course on "Eight Great Men," but found ourselves frustrated about the mechanics of reading materials, and, more importantly, we were not really "psyched" about the idea. "Great Men" would probably be a good theme but the passion for a theme on the part of the faculty is a crucial element. At that time, that certain spark was not lit in us for "Great Men." At about 6 P.M., a spark was lit when one of us suggested, "Hey, why not do a theme on the lifetime of our students?"

"Yeah. Why not?"

"Sounds great. We could call it 'The Last Sixteen Years.' "

It was finally slenderized to "The Nineteen Sixties" and became the second community theme.

The following year, we similarly debated and discussed until "Urban Man" became our fall theme.

The precedents having been established for the selection and operation of the community theme, we were prepared to yield the decision-making process for the fourth theme to the students. After talking to our advisor groups on a Thursday afternoon about the plan, we announced an after-school meeting to form a committee to organize the next theme. Within the next two weeks, a group of fifteen students discussed theme possibilities (Death, the Seventies, Great Men, Communications, Russia), researched books and films

for each, narrowed the list, and conducted a survey of opinion among the Community after supporters of each theme debated the merits. The students, with the blessing of the faculty, decided that "Communications" would be the next theme.

The selection of materials for a theme is as vital as the selection of the theme itself. There must be available a book or a group of books and films that approach the theme in an interdisciplinary manner. Books must be readable for high school students and have to stimulate seminar discussions on substantive issues. We found *Brave New World* and *Walden Two* particularly valuable in the "Future of Society." Desmond Morris' *The Human Zoo* was a comprehensive introduction to "Urban Man." Feature films, as opposed to the dry run-of-the-mill educational variety, consistently work best. Scheduled as they are on Friday afternoons (with follow-up seminars on Monday), they offer an enriching and yet relaxing finish to a hectic week of seminars, discussions, lectures and field trips.

Although the bulk of the Monday through Friday sessions are held in school, special events of relevance to the theme are frequent. No one teacher has a monopoly on ideas for speakers or trips. One classic example occurred at the beginning of "Urban Man." Since *The Human Zoo* was our first reading, one teacher decided to take a group of students to an animal zoo in the middle of the human zoo: Central Park Zoo. The trip proved so successful that in the next few weeks, all students and teachers made the same excursion. Besides providing a learning experience impossible to duplicate inside the school building, the trip forced students and teachers to socialize and thus had a wonderful carry-over in Community life. It is the nature of the theme to topple barriers: between the classroom and the outside world, between students and teachers, between learning and fun, between one subject and another.

New York obviously provided many trips during "Urban Man." Even in a theme like "Communications," though, we were pleasantly surprised by outings to radio and television

stations, newspaper offices, computer centers and theaters. During that theme, one student suggested we go to a grammar school to remind ourselves how children are taught to communicate. Another student told us that her mother worked in a school for the retarded and would be happy to have our students come over and observe and even help with the children. Several groups took advantage of this unique opportunity and a dozen students arranged a mini-course in the spring for which they served as teacher aides at the school.

In-school theme sessions are as varied as the myriad sub-topics of our subject and the thousands of teaching techniques ever thought up—and some never before conceived.

During the "Future of Society," the science and English teachers led a debate as to the value of science fiction; a seminar centered around the playing of computer music à la *Brave New World*; a student led a discussion on the place of learning communities in the future of education; the school principal lectured on the place of religion in the next fifty years.

For "Urban Man," a student compared New York with the city of his childhood, Rio de Janeiro; opposing candidates for the New York City Council argued their positions and responded to student questioning; a teacher playing "devil's advocate" maintained that according to Desmond Morris man has made no progress since the dawn of time; a poetry reading of city verses was held; a main school psychology teacher explained the neuroses and psychoses peculiar to the city dweller; students from Harlem visited us and related what the city meant to them.

During "Communications," a seminar was held in which verbal communication was outlawed; a guest speaker lectured on Eric Severeid; a student's brother, a computer technician at IBM, brought in a barrage of equipment and printed read-out calendars and drawings, using the Community telephone as a link to his company's computer; student hobbyists in the occult held a seance; a group of

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students and teachers examined the "gobbledygook" of political speeches; everyone tried to figure out Marshall McLuhan.

Seminars, slide shows, movies, debates, lectures, performances, readings, music—the possibilities are endless. Particularly useful are those sessions led by teams of two or three teachers. In such cases, the interdisciplinary nature of the theme is most visibly present. Student-teacher teams are also popular and worthwhile. More often than not, the student, under guidance from the teacher before the session begins, is able not to just hold his own, but to take full charge, with the teacher listening and tossing in a comment now and then.

Individual sessions are constantly enriched as students and teacher form links and connections with other sessions that they, but not everyone, have attended. Therefore, as a result of the peculiar structure of scheduling of the theme, ideas and concepts do not end at the conclusion of any one seminar but are absorbed and interpreted and infused back into circulation at subsequent events.

To describe the mechanics of the theme, we shall take an imaginary week beginning Monday, January 29, the first week, we shall assume, of a new theme.

A meeting to plan the theme sessions must be held ten days prior to the week being organized. In this case, students and teachers would gather in home base on the afternoon of Friday, January 19. It is no small problem to always be so ahead of ourselves. Not infrequently, in the stupor of a late Friday caucus, a tired voice asks, "Wait a minute. Isn't there a holiday on that Wednesday?"

"No, that's this week."

"What week?"

"Next week, I mean."

"Right. Next week."

"No, no, no. This coming week, not the week we're planning."

"Oh, that's right."

It is necessary to engage in this futurism so that the

discussion topics can be posted that afternoon on the vast theme bulletin board, thus allowing students enough time (Monday through Wednesday) to decide on and sign up for the sessions. On our imaginary time line, students will be signing up January 22 through 24.

Students are always anxious to attend the meetings, in contrast to the normal Friday rush to get home. After all, they helping to decide how they'll be spending their school time. At times—the best times—students come up with a rash of ideas for theme sessions which they themselves will lead. One Friday, during the "Communications" theme, a group decided that they would plan and run the entire week with only advice from the teachers.

Each meeting begins with a discussion of the general focus of the week in question. A large theme is best studied in units. Each week therefore focused on a sub-theme, usually one or a portion of one of the core books. The focus established, the students and teachers bounce possibilities around until a week of sessions is finalized.

Our original plan for three different periods of theme sessions each afternoon (except for the Thursday advisor session) proved too draining for us and too much a matter of frustrating overchoice for the students. As a result, the past three themes have operated with two sets of sessions each day from Monday through Wednesday with a film on Friday. Each afternoon session is usually repeated, serving to further reduce teacher preparation, thereby improving quality, and to expose more members of the Community to similar topics.

As each session is decided upon, a sign-up sheet is prepared:

LEARNING COMMUNITY THEME SESSION.
DAY: *TIME:* *ROOM:*
TITLE:
DESCRIPTION:

ASSIGNMENT:
MODERATOR(S):
This session is limited to _____ students.
Please sign names below.
If the session is filled and you suggest it be offered again, sign the reverse of this sheet.

Assignments are crucial. No matter how exciting a proposed session might sound, lively discussion is always abetted when students are prepared for it as the result of prior reading.

It is similarly important that students be able to judge the session in terms of their own aptitude. Thus, the description should include a comment regarding the difficulty of the session.

All the sign up sheets are mounted on our theme bulletin board in home base so that the entire week's schedule is made apparent. For example, the *Brave New World* week of "Future of Society" was organized as follows:

MONDAY

First Period:
Introduction to the Novel
Huxley the Man
Huxley and History
The Biology of a Brave New World

Second Period:
Same sessions as first period

All Afternoon:
Experiments in Mind Control

TUESDAY

First Period:
Introduction to the Novel
Art and the Brave New World
God and the Brave New World
Computer Music

Second Period:
Same sessions as first period

All Afternoon:
Field Trip Multi-Media Theatre:
At the Feelies

WEDNESDAY

First Period:
Would You Want to Live There?
Morality in the Brave New World
The Individual in Brave New World
Brave New World and
Walden Two: Comparisons
and Contrasts

Second Period:
Same sessions as first period
All Afternoon:
Guest Lecture: Is the U.S. a
Brave New World?

THURSDAY
All Afternoon:
Advisor Group Meetings

FRIDAY
All Afternoon:
Feature Film: *1984*

Monday morning is usually a difficult time to get students (not to mention teachers) moving. This is not so in at least one area of Learning Community life. There is real excitement before class or during free time as students crowd in front of the bulletin board checking the offerings and signing up for their selections.

As students sign up they also prepare two copies of a schedule for the week. They keep one copy; the other goes to advisors. A sample copy would look like this:

LEARNING COMMUNITY THEME SESSIONS

WEEK BEGINNING APRIL 1ST

	TITLE	*ASSIGNMENT*	*TIME*	*MOD.*	*ROOM*
Mo 1	INTRO TO NOVEL		12:30	JA	120
Mo 2	HUXLEY THE MAN	FINISH	1:15	DP	121
Tu 1	FIELD TRIP	BRAVE	MEET AT 11:00	AG	HOME BASE
Tu 2	↓				
We 1	MORALITY IN BNW	NEW	12:30	LD	20
We 2	BNW + WALDEN 2	WORLD	1:15	JP	120
Th 1	ADVISOR GROUP		12:30		
Th 2	↓		↓		
Fr 1	MOVIE: 1984		12:30		
Fr 2	↓		↓		

NAME JOE SMITH ADVISOR B.T.

Students give their advisors the schedule at the Thursday meetings. At the beginning of each year, much of the long meetings is spent reviewing student schedules, insuring that advisees are receiving as wide a range of teachers and areas of interdisciplinary study as possible.

The original sign-up sheets are removed from the bulletin board and distributed to moderators to serve as attendance lists during the sessions.

A student receives credit for the theme based on his fulfillment of four basic requirements: participation in the

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sessions including preparatory reading, the keeping of a theme log, passing an oral examination and completing a project. Each advisor is primarily responsible for the progress of his students in the theme and is expected to help his advisees adapt those general goals to their personal aptitudes and talents. In particular, the core readings can prove to be too massive a burden for some students. The advisor and student, in such cases, can arrange replacement texts, or truncate the list, or make use of the theme books as texts in remedial reading skills courses, or arrange a tutorial program. The progress of academically slower students needs to be monitored carefully during the theme and, as a rule, as the sun sets on Friday evenings, the Community faculty concludes its meetings by comparing notes on individual students.

The log is a combination notebook-diary-composition book. In general, a student is expected to keep track of what goes on at each theme session, but no Harvard outlines are wanted in a log. Students are urged to relate what that session meant to *them*, what they agreed with and what they thought aspired only to hogwash, what was right and wrong with the session, what connection one session makes with others. In short, the log should not be the secretarial minutes of a theme, but rather the story of the encounter of a theme by a young human being.

Logs are evaluated by advisors each week and finally at the theme's conclusion. Clearly, since logs are personal documents, they cannot be judged comparatively, but only subjectively. Some, naturally, are better than others. Most impressive were those astoundingly honest and sensitive comments about the sessions that had real impact: one student went on for five pages on how she was moved by the plight of animals she had seen on a field trip; others wrote about the doubts and confusion they felt regarding certain controversial questions raised in seminars. The advisor is allowed a rare access to the personal thoughts of his students in an important area of Community life. The log serves, therefore, not only as academic accountability, but as a

further means of communication between student and teacher. As such, logs remain private between advisor and advisee unless permission is obtained from the student, as it has been for the following:

"Modernization of Man Session: Man works at a ridiculous pace. Why? Because he is on a schedule. Notice how city dwellers have more ulcers than country dwellers. And headaches and fatigue as well. Why? This pace of living. Is it healthy to live at the pace we do? It must take a special kind of person to make it because there are many who can't handle it. (Nervous breakdowns are not uncommon.) Before entering any city, there should be a sign, 'Enter at your own risk.'

"Rio De Janeiro and N.Y.C. Session: Marcelo, a student in the Community, talked about his childhood in Brazil. I really learned a lot. The people are said to be unprejudiced because they all have a little blood from all the races. But when I asked about interracial marriages, Marcelo said they were no go in the upper classes. We had the opinions of an upper class Brazilian. I'd also like to hear from someone in the middle or lower class. I wonder how much persecution goes on that nobody hears about. It seems as if the government caters to the people with money. Marcelo spoke as if Brazil was the ideal, but I wonder. Does the fact that people have the right to vote make a country a democracy? I wonder. Not if the people know nothing about the people in government or how the government works. And that's what it seems to be like in Brazil."

Complementing the written log are the oral exams given by advisors to each of their students at theme's end. While serving as an important check on how much the student has participated in the theme, it enables the Community to piece together all the loose ends of eight weeks into a cohesive whole through a concluding fifteen-minute dialogue.

Orals can be incredibly stimulating for both participants when they are well prepared intellectually and emotionally for solid discussion. Some students, of course, have to be properly motivated against thinking that an oral is just a

bull session. On the other hand, hard-working students are often overly terrified of thinking on their feet without the isolation of the written test with which they are so familiar. Good oral exams should be pointed, but relaxed.

Study guides for the orals are distributed to supplement the students' logs. The guide is used as a springboard in the exam itself. The complete format varies, as it should, with each student. An advisor's goal is to elicit insights into the major ideas of the theme and possible comparisons and contrasts among the readings and sessions. When an oral becomes a mutual sharing of ideas, the exam reaches its apex.

For many students the project is really the culmination of the theme. Ideally, the project represents the student's creative use of his own skills, whether writing, film-making, handiwork, model building, research, or experimentation, conjoined with the concepts of a Community theme. Projects are planned early, discussed endlessly in advisor groups and home base, often worked out during the day in school, and shared along the way and at the end with the entire Community. Sophisticated and sometimes cynical teenagers allow themselves to be caught up in the old "show and tell" excitement of grammar school days. We have already mentioned some projects completed in previous themes. Others include the scale model of the New York World's Fair constructed for "Sixties," taped interviews with people on long lines waiting to see *The Exorcist* for "Communications," an original radio drama during the same theme, and an ecological analysis of the East River for "Urban Man."

Many of our students have claimed that they work harder for a theme than they do in a six-month skills course. There are after all four full afternoons each week of activities as well as a hefty reading load and all the other requirements. All this work notwithstanding, the theme is, for most, the most satisfying aspect of the Community's academic program.

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Chapter Six

THE COMMUNITY AND THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT: ACADEMICS

Special interest studies give equal importance to what youngsters themselves nominate as worth studying.

Edwin Mason, *Collaborative Learning* [13]

It is a fallacy to suppose that by omitting a subject you teach nothing about it. On the contrary, you teach that it is to be omitted.

Sir Walter Moberly

"Cut your hair for the school community!"

"Don't complain about the cafeteria food for the sake of the school community."

"Benedict Arnold High has the most manicured lawn in America. It's good public relations for the school community. Don't walk on it."

"For the sake of the school community, don't print that article about student dissatisfaction with courses."

Community! Has there ever been a word more misused, more clichéd, more perverted in educational parlance? "Community" is too often used as a code word—much like "law and order" or "national security"—for the subjugation of student freedom and choice. Schools using the slogans printed above are demanding that students adhere to only certain modes of behavior for what is called a "community" but what is, in reality, a well-oiled bureaucracy demanding subservience for the sake of efficiency.

Such institutions make "community" and "individuality" appear to be contradictory terms. They should not have to be.

We have discovered that a Learning Community can only exist if a student understands that community depends upon his individuality and seeks not to suppress it.

Individualization! If a word competes with "community" for the distinction of being most misused, clichéd and perverted, it is certainly "individualization." The excesses of the fads of individualization and the misconceptions about its ramifications provide the single greatest cause of the current backlash, as reported in current news media, against innovative educational programs.

We, too, were burned by half-baked schemes in the 1960's. At our high school one year, the order came down to us to individualize. As subsequent directives explained, to individualize meant to inculcate "independent study." (There's another wonderfully confused piece of argot.) All teachers of all students in all classes were to provide study packets and arrange to meet students in departmental resource centers. In January, when evaluative sessions were

held among students and teachers, this is what we heard:

"I don't understand what's so great about this. What's the big change? All that happens is that you get all your assignments at the beginning of the term in a fat stack of ditto papers. Big deal."

"I think it stinks. We're supposed to get help from our teachers. But when I'm free, he's not. I keep falling behind."

"I don't see any individual study. Everyone in the courses—in most anyway—gets the same packet with the same due dates. It's like an assembly line."

"Yeah. I've been doing okay. But it's too impersonal. I might just as well be left alone with a textbook—or a teaching machine."

For teachers, it was an impossible task, in a large school with a full class load, to cope with the tons of paper and the problems of regularly seeing and evaluating student work. Only in those departments which reorganized classes and schedules and prepared all teachers to serve as resource personnel for all students could personal attention take place.

We learned from that experience and it affected the way we planned the Learning Community. We learned that the goal should, indeed, be individualization, but that independent study is not synonomous with that end, although it may, in some cases, be a tool. We learned that individualization on a mass scale can, when improperly administered, bear an unhappy resemblance to anarchy. We learned that real individualization demands vast outpourings of time and attention and effort. We learned that to really individualize is not to force any one method of learning on a student.

Community and individuality: one cannot outweigh the other. The key is balance. When those two ideals are co-equal in a school program, they do not contradict each other; they foster each other. This chapter focuses on the careful balance in things academic. A later chapter will probe community and individuality as they affect the personal values of students.

Our Community theme does, as we have explained, offer the opportunity for individual choice and initiative. The log, the oral exam and the project are the most personalized kinds of course requirements. There is no denying, however, that compromises are made for the benefit of the whole Community: bright students must have patience with slower classmates in particular seminars; students have varying levels of interest in the subject matter; the theme proceeds at relatively the same pace for all; core readings are "not too easy and not too hard." The compromises are made to provide a truly communal program. A balance is struck.

Conversely—and importantly—skills courses in the Learning Community, while homogeneously populated and demanding a general curriculum of concepts to be mastered, are balanced by the ability of the teachers in our small and intimate Community to personalize the courses for each student outside the framework of formal class meetings.

Basic Skills of English is as traditional and non-individual a sounding course title as has ever existed. It must conjure up visions of spelling bees and sentence diagramming and who-whom quizzes. But it is far from all of that. Its goal is for each student to read and write as well as he can. Classes are motivational, setting a new project before the students. Resulting assignments are not collected, red-penciled and returned to line student waste baskets. The real, hard work is done at weekly individual consultations between student and teacher (on their "free" time in home base) at which, together, assignments are reviewed, problems diagnosed and improvements recommended. Within a month, although all students are working on the same basic projects, some will be imitating Hemingway and others will have just discovered the comma. Balance.

Virtually every skills course incorporates this kind of appointment system to insure that each student corrects his problems and exploits his talents.

Aware of individual needs in a given course, the teacher has the further opportunity and responsibility to tailor class assignments. In Science Topics, for instance, Bill requires

two major and six minor projects. What constitutes a project is an open-ended question for each student who, as he chats with Bill, decides what would be most interesting and beneficial to do.

Suffice it to say that individualization is the rule in Community courses. What is exceptional, as we firmly believe it should be, is independent study. It is employed for the very special talent, the very special interest or the very special problem. And the student is always in a position of choice with regard to independence. He is never forced and only rarely not allowed to pursue such study as long as continuous teacher-student consultation and evaluation is maintained.

Georgina's flair and talent for poetry was so far in advance of that of the other students in her Creative Writing class that the course, by itself, would have been more stagnating than helpful. As she said, "You should make me come up with about two thousand words a week even if you never read it. I've got to produce." Her usual reaction to class assignments was, "Let me work on this idea I have instead, okay?" It became clear. A writer like Georgy needs to follow her own instincts. Why else do so many novelists and poets recall how school strangled their creativity until they had to decide between formal education and hitting the road of their own making? In the Community, Georgy arranged to spend hour upon hour working at her craft. But she was not left completely alone either. Often, each week, she'd appear in home base with a stack of typed papers and say, "Okay, John, you want to take a look? I like this one the best." Nor was she separated from the class. She did attend and her poetry became the locus of critical discussions. Her immediate goal was to enter a national creative writing contest, and reaction from her fellow students was as important to her as the example of her canon was to them. It was no small thrill, at year's end, for the group to discuss Georgy's prize winner as it appeared in the pages of the sponsoring magazine.

Georgy's devotion to poetry continues as do her habits of

hard work. She wrote to us last summer, "The week after graduation I worked from nine to twelve at night and loved every minute of it. I think if I had more time, I could have pulled off another prize-winning story or poem. After that I was totally exhausted and my writing slowed down a bit. Yet I was always thinking of what I was going to write next." She still drops in from time to time, sits in on classes and discusses the hows and whys of her new work.

Jimmy wasn't after any literary prizes. He had just about conquered the simple sentence when he joined the Community. He didn't find courses too inhibiting, but too advanced. Without exception, all of us, as Community teachers, found it necessary to set up special programs of remedial aid including different assignments, readings and a beefed up schedule of consultations in addition to, not as a replacement for, a regular program of Community courses. Jimmy was, by this method, prepared for the work his colleagues were studying in class and could, therefore, make some progress.

In the middle of his senior year, Matt discovered that the college he was aiming for demanded a year of high school chemistry as a prerequisite. He hadn't considered taking it before, but arranged with Bill to use free and after-school time for study and reading and experimentation and consultation, earning the needed credit.

Mike's knowledge of mathematics went beyond the normal high school syllabus. He was ready to tackle college level calculus and analytic geometry. Normally, his only recourse would be to study the subject completely on his own and forego further math in school until he reached Columbia University. Instead, at the Learning Community, Angelo ordered collegiate texts for Mike and provided him with tutoring in home base. The program was so successful that in the second semester Mike decided to teach, with Angelo's guidance, a mini-course in calculus to other advanced math students.

These examples make almost too much sense to make news. Given the time and opportunity, is there any teacher

who would not prefer to be able to do things this way? Simply, the Learning Community insures that time and opportunity are indeed provided.

Perhaps more unconventional are the ways in which students can pursue interests beyond the ken of standard Community subjects and sometimes beyond the range of the abilities of the faculty. This is when independent study makes the most sense. Since, as long as it is part of Community life, a course is never totally independent, we call these programs "one student courses."

Oceanography, botany, Shakespeare, Communism—these and dozens of other areas of study were suggested as full-scale courses by individual students. Unfortunately, there wasn't a large enough response to warrant their inclusion on the schedule. The students who originally asked for them were not easily deterred, however, and arranged with us programs of readings and projects and appointments so they could follow through on these interests and receive credit for their work.

And what of even more esoteric pursuits? What of the enriching areas all too often, and unfairly, classified as extra-curricular when they represent to individual students the most important aspect of their education? A student who, like Tommy, is fascinated with gardening and horticulture, who has started a side business landscaping homes and businesses in his neighborhood, and who wants to spend his life greening his thumb, deserves to spend school time learning as much as possible about the field and to receive academic credit for it. But no one of us knew enough about plants to dare to teach Tommy. Somehow, a study packet seemed absurd. A gardener should get dirt, not ink, on his hands. With a few phone calls, Bill managed to get Tommy an apprenticeship at the Queens Botanical Gardens two days each week. Tommy was evaluated by the staff at the Gardens and by Bill via the log which Tommy kept and submitted to him.

With the Gardens as a precedent, the Community became less and less limited by any one school building

when special interests were concerned. We did our best to arrange for the use of available facilities and expertise around the city to supplement the resources of the Community.

Jerry spent an afternoon a week working in the Borough President's office learning first-hand the procedures of government and politics. Yearning to actualize the rising consciousness of his blackness, Gary worked Thursday mornings at a nearby Community Center serving his neighborhood. Patti spent Saturdays at a nearby college's art workshop. David took a six-week course on the American Indian at the Brooklyn Museum. A small group of students worked as student aides in a local grammar school program for the mentally retarded.

Some of these students may have engaged in these volunteer programs with or without the Community. Most probably would not have. It is up to the school—and it is the policy of the Learning Community—to encourage this work and to grant academic credit for it, rather than to retreat, as so many schools do, with a "This should be done on your own time. It has nothing to do with academics or getting a diploma. It's extra-curricular." At the Learning Community, the line between curricular and extra-curricular grows fainter and fainter.

Students who run a Community newspaper deserve credit at least as much as those who take a formal journalism course; those students who spend long hours staging dramatic production for the amusement of the rest of the Community deserve credit—even though they enjoy what they're doing and would do it without credit; a student who organizes the Community to boycott grapes or recycle aluminum or register voters is learning social science in an active and rewarding manner and deserves credit.

Remembering that balance is the key, however, we are most pleased when the special interests of an individual can be shared with the other individuals of the Community. As we mentioned, Mike taught a course in calculus. Tommy returned to the Community with the expertise gained at the

Botanical Gardens, claimed a plot of land outside the home base and taught other students vegetable farming. Carlos, who borrowed a storage room in the school and turned it into a dark room, wound up offering a course in photography and developing to his colleagues. These and dozens of other special interests have been institutionalized for the benefit of the whole as part of the Community mini-course program.

Mini-courses are hardly revolutionary; they are, by now, widespread in secondary education. In the Community, we took the notion but applied it to the special interests of our students so that fully 85% of Community mini-courses result from student suggestions and, during our most recent semester, half were taught by students with the faculty serving as aides, advisors and moderators.

As each Community theme draws to a close, students are asked to start coming up with ideas. "This is the part of the Community program of which you can be most in charge. If an idea has cropped up in a skills or in the theme that you'd like to get deeper into, plan a mini-course on it. If there's a field you feel has thus far been ignored and you'd like to learn about it, suggest. If you have a hobby or talent to share with the rest of us, teach a mini-course yourself. We'll help you plan it and organize it, but if you know more than we do in a subject, you, not us, should teach."

Two kinds of mini-courses have developed over the years: "doing" and "knowing." The knowing courses meet on fundamentally the same basis as skills, three class sessions per week for three groups of courses. Students take two or three knowing courses. The "doing" courses, which allow members to practice and learn about planting or building or dancing or cooking or sporting, operate two full afternoons each week.

But mini-courses explode all over at all times. Since there must always be a faculty member in attendance at all classes (that's a school rule), we are limited as to how many mini-courses can be scheduled on a standard school day. Thus the Community has forsaken all "standards." Last semester, for instance, Ronnie and Darlene offered to teach

cartooning. Since only a handful of students wanted the course, it was given after school every day for fun or for credit. Similarly, our personal typing course operates on that basis. Will students stay after school? In two years, fifty Community members have completed the typing course.

The Community film study course is held at weekly four-hour evening sessions. The thrill of being able to screen a feature film without slicing it up to fit forty-three minute periods can only really be understood by a teacher who has heard the passing bell ring during the Odessa Steps montage in *Potemkin*. Each semester, about one-third of the school signs up to make Wednesday a twelve-hour school day, from nine to nine, to include the film course. One night the film students got together with the cooking course kids to plan a banquet prior to *A Night at the Opera*. Now, that's interdisciplinary!

Even the regularly scheduled mini-courses spill over into weekends and evenings—and sometimes dawn. Bill's ecology doing course meets on Monday at the American Museum of Natural History. On Wednesday, the group meets at the school at 6:30 A.M. to bus for a day's hike at Harriman State Park or Bear Mountain, returning, tired and bedraggled, for that evening's film.

Angelo's Thoreau knowing course culminated in a three-day visit to Walden Pond in Massachusetts. The Camping course included three camping weekends. The drama class signed up to attend a series of four plays at the American Place Theatre even though the last play was some six months after the course concluded. Dave's Psychology mini-courses have included night-owl jaunts to Psycho-Drama and Mind Control workshops.

And there has been the Novels of Hesse, the Lyrics of Bob Dylan, the Literature of Horror, Shakespeare, Women in Literature, Poetry and Rock, and Huckleberry Finn.

And Analytic Geometry and Trigonometry and Consumer Math and Finite Math and Logic.

And First Aid and Sex Education and Psychology of Love and Marriage and the Existential Search.

And Woodworking and Karate and Tennis and Auto Mechanics and Sewing and Guitar.

And even a special program in which Community students worked as assistants to teachers of the retarded (*see photo p. 60*).

And so it goes. Balance.

Annie wrote to us of this balance and of her year in the Community:

"In my previous years in school, I did all the work I had to do, but no more. In the Learning Community, I began to *want* to go home and read or see a film that was discussed that day. The world became one huge classroom.

"Communication with other people is essential to any one person's education. The Community provided a tremendous opportunity for this. We shared and combined our knowledge with each other. During the time spent in home base, I could consult with teachers and other students on an individual basis. I had so many wise and exciting and insightful—and just plain enjoyable—conversations.

"We had much freedom in the Community. I never felt stifled. If we ever had complaints, we were free to bring them up to any or all of the teachers. Our arguments were always listened to and considered with great openness and respect. The teachers were always sensitive to our needs and our ideas. Not only did they teach us; they were anxious to learn from us."

We were; we are; we have in the past; and we continue to learn. And we continue to deal with our students as separate, extraordinary individuals, working and learning together in community.

Chapter Seven

MEASURING ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Besides, what does an "A" mean? If all schools were comparable, a grade might have some meaning, but they aren't and it doesn't. Not even class rank means much. But a folder full of the students' papers and the teachers' commentaries allow one—parent or college admissions officer—to make a reasonable evaluation. It's coming.

Henry F. Beechhold, *The Creative Classroom* [14]

"But what if I fail?" Hans suggested shyly.

"Fail?" The good man stopped short. "Failing is absolutely out of the question. Completely impossible. What an idea!"

Hermann Hesse, *Beneath the Wheel* [15]

". . . and I hope the Community will be different in terms of grades. I'm tired of always working for grades. A test for a grade. A paper for a grade. An answer for a grade. Grades, grades, grades. That's all anyone seems to care about in the old system. And not only teachers. Even in the cafeteria, you always hear, 'What did you get on the test?' Or 'I got a better mark than you.' I really hope the Learning Community won't be like that."

So did we. For years, long before the Community was even thought of, we had had similar complaints. As teachers, we might have hated grades even more. In three years, we had been ordered to change marking systems three times. We went from a numerical system to an alphabetical system to letter grades plus an explanatory paragraph. One afternoon in the faculty room, under that last system, with eighty teachers attempting to sort one hundred fifty grade sheets each into forty different homeroom envelopes, would make the most Spartan of teachers shudder. Many students eventually wound up with a fingerprint bedecked folder full of shredded and dog-eared papers. It took a master of jigsaw puzzledom to determine which grade went with what class along with which paragraph.

We hated grades. We hated their supposed accuracy. We hated the competition they engendered. We hated the way they fed student neuroses. We hated their natural tendency to make students more grade-conscious than learning-conscious.

And, finally, we hated thinking about grades. We even hated complaining about grades. They had to exist (so we had been trained to believe). But did we really have to think and talk about them?

So, in response to the kind of student application printed above, our response was liable to have been, "Sure, yeah, the Community is going to de-emphasize grades. Let's not discuss grades."

It was mid-semester of our first year of operation before we held our first meeting dealing with the evaluation of student academic work. We had postponed the event as long

as possible. To be fair, the "we" was not unanimous. There existed a hard-core Bill-John-Jack axis of indifference to grades, distinguished by a particular numbness for action on any evaluation system.

Attempting to forestall any serious discussion of the matter at hand by diversionary anecdote-telling, Bill opened the session by recalling the system in effect three years earlier—a system we had all taken great pains to eradicate from our memories—in which students in each of the "tracks" to which they had been assigned (pigeonhole number one) were preordained to receive grades within only a certain scale (pigeonhole number two). For instance, a student in a track 3 group (affectionately known as the dummy class) could receive a grade between 67 and 82—no higher; no lower.

"Oh, and do you remember how proud we were to score well in this game. The fewer exceptions we had, supposedly the more apt judges of achievement we were."

"Not me. I remember, believe it or not, being hauled into the chairman's office to explain how I could possibly have given—given, mind you—three 90's in a dummy class."

"Unbelievable. And we practically had to bow down and swear never to reveal the system to one of 'them'—the students. They were left to their own devices to discover the scheme."

When the laughter subsided, the axis was more sure than ever that it wanted no part of grades. We knew what we didn't want. We didn't want a system that in any way resembled what we detested so much. We wanted to de-emphasize grades so completely that we wouldn't even have to consider them for more than a few minutes a year.

Only Angelo had really investigated the potential for a more enlightened system, but his and Dave's arguments for it were greeted with yawns and irrelevancies and, at last, shouts of disapproval. "Of course we all want to de-emphasize the negative aspects of grading," Angelo would say, "but you can't just ignore it. To combat years and years of cruel marking systems, you've got to take positive action toward a new system."

"Okay, whatever you come up with is fine with us."

"No. That's not enough. You have to be passionate about grading."

It had taken a large chink in the axis' defenses to have even considered grading as much as we had. To be passionate seemed impossible—and ridiculous. Nonetheless, the long meeting took hold of us—in our thoughts at home and in side talks in home base.

Angelo outlined his proposals at our next meeting on the subject. In general, he explained, the new system was to be based on the kind of evaluative scheme John Dewey High in Brooklyn had been using. "We should distinguish between grading and evaluation. Grading means symbolic numbers or letters for efficient record-keeping and space-saving. It has little to do with education. We should want to evaluate—to let a student know what he has done well in and where he needs help. In a Learning Community, this should be continuous as teacher talks to student and as teacher to advisor to student communication takes place. But a written evaluation is necessary too, especially for parents, colleges and other agencies."

"Oh, oh. Here it comes," voiced an axis member.

"Teachers should write—on a special form we'll have to put together—a progress report in the middle of every course and a final evaluation at the end for each student. Our only shorthand should be to record an "M" if the student is mastering the concepts and skills of the course, an "MW" if the student shows mastery but is in need of remediation in certain areas and "R" if the student must review and restudy what has been covered.

"On the progress report, we should explain in writing what exactly the student has done in the course and what, in the case of an "MW" or "R," he must do to improve.

"For the final evaluations, since the course is over, only "M" or "R" will apply, but the explanations should be the same or maybe even more complete.

"These will be done in duplicate: one for the parents and one for the advisor to keep in the student's file."

"How about the office?"

"We'll have to prepare a special permanent record form to include all the courses and written evaluations for each student."

"Oh, they're going to love that upstairs. They're already complaining about how little room they have to store records and how much they spend xeroxing stuff to send to colleges."

"Then we'll have to fight them. That's what always happens. For the sake of efficiency and space, you wind up with numbers. We have to show them that this system—and only a system like this—is consistent with the Learning Community concept insofar as it individualizes student-teacher relationships and minimizes all that damn grade competition. We'll just have to fight them if they object. That's why we have to be passionate."

"Well, it sounds fine to me, but I'm not sure how passionate I am about it."

Although we could all accept this new system as a working hypothesis, each of us had to work out for himself how much he believed in, was convinced of, was passionate about, evaluation. This "working out" proceeded day after day, discussion after discussion, meeting after meeting. The system, after all, had to be put into practice and the axis could not be comfortable with it until they had seen it work in the Community.

To really come to grips with a system rooted in the virtual elimination of the encouragement of competition may at first, and especially in comparison with the "going for the jugular" fostered by grading systems at med schools and law schools and many, many high schools, seem quite easy. But such a concept has vast implications for an academic Community as it and its members grow. Competition goes beyond school grading systems. And a Community trying to deal with the world "out there" has to understand and relate to the competition "out there." And we, with an eye on the system we have created, have to be able to respond when students ask, "But don't we want this to be the best school

around?" or "How come you care so much about the Knicks?" or "When is competition good?" or "Whom can you compete with? Anyone?" The dialectic still continues. But we can stick with our grading system and believe in it on the most pragmatic and realistic of levels. We have seen too much ego destruction at the hands of grading schemes that encourage competition. And we have seen, in our years in the Learning Community, that students can and do achieve as much—and more and better—in our program.

One of our graduates dropped by recently and provided us with added reinforcement. The effects, it seems, linger on. Phil is as motivated a student as we have ever met. He thrived in the Community, working in this "non-competitive" system with an incredibly unwavering goal of learning as much as possible about poetry and practicing to be the best poet he could be. During his senior year with us, he had already started getting his work published in literary journals. As a freshman at New York University, however, he didn't attain the necessary score on the standardized placement test to be allowed to take advanced courses in English and was, rather, deposited in the rote Freshman Composition course. He was hardly willing to allow a number spewed forth by a Princeton computer to determine his future. As he might have with one of us, he presented the chairman of the English department with his portfolio of published and unpublished poetry and demanded his due. Ironically, thrust into the competitive world at Washington Square, he received the only "A" in the advanced course he was finally permitted to take.

The working out in our own minds of our evaluation theory is encouraged more rapidly when it comes time for us to actually draw up written comments for our students.

Shortly before one semester's end, Marie approached Bill: "I think I'd like a mark instead of a written evaluation."

"Why?"

"Well, look, if you average all the test marks in this Ecology course and compare the quality of the papers turned

in, wouldn't you say I was near the top of the class?"

"I have and you are."

"Right. But both Linda and I are both going to get M's. Now, I like Linda—she's a great kid—but she's not exactly Ewell Gibbons when it comes to ecology. How come we both get M's?"

"Linda has mastered the course too as far as her talent allows. She deserves an M. She's done her best. Would you prefer to get a 99 and Linda a 65 if you have both done your best?"

"Well, no. But there should be a difference."

"There is—in the written comments. I'll explain on yours exactly what and how well you've done. I'll do the same for everyone including Linda. If you have worked at various levels and qualities, this will come out on the evaluation sheets. All an M means is that a student deserves to receive credit for the course."

"But I want to go to Cornell. My record has to be spectacular or I won't get in."

"Your record is spectacular. My evaluation of you will praise you to the hilt. I'll even write that you were the best student in the class if that will make you happy. It's true, after all. But, believe me, what Cornell cares about is how good a student you are and not that you're better than Linda."

"Who knows if they'll even bother to read these comments at colleges?"

"All I can tell you is that we've had no problems so far —not one—and our students have been getting into some great schools. But if Cornell or any college or scholarship agency asks for numbers instead of evaluations, we'll give them numbers. We're not out to mess up your chances for a good university, you know. We want to increase them. And we want to help Linda's chances too. John could give Linda a 65 in English for instance. Or he could say that she's the worst writer he's ever come across. But what he did write was that she entered his class barely able to complete a sentence and left having finished a pretty decent short story.

He lauded her up and down. She deserved it."

Written evaluations do not suit every need. We have had to translate into a numerical system to feed the computers that select which college of the City University of New York will accept what student under the open enrollment system.

But evaluation should exist to meet the needs of students, not computers. And, over the years, the Community's plan has shown itself to be flexible enough and affirmative enough to fulfill that obligation.

Our firmest personal commitment in philosophy and in practice with regard to evaluation is to the emphasis placed on success rather than failure. We judge students on the basis of what they have learned, not on what they haven't learned. An R in the Community is not at all synonymous with an F in the traditional grading modes.

Despite American constitutional guarantees, double jeopardy does exist in at least two places we can think of: baseball and school grades. A player thrown out at second both loses his base and gains an out for his team. A student who flunks out of a course both loses credit toward graduation and receives an ineradicable F on his permanent record. We find that unfair and educationally counterproductive.

Students need a certain number of credits to graduate. If, in a Learning Community course, a student is unable to master a course (unable even to earn partial credit), he will not be granted any credit and will have to pick it up elsewhere. Together with his personal disappointment and frustration, that seems to us failure enough. We hardly have to penalize him further by emblazoning a scarlet letter on his report card. A written summary of his problem suffices.

The Community's permanent record forms, which are sent to colleges, include only those evaluations for which the student has received credit. They reflect student accomplishments. A happy by-product is the encouragement given to Community members to experiment with new and different courses without the threat of a permanent F should

the experiment not work out.

As much as the evaluation system is an outgrowth of the Learning Community philosophy, so too has it had an impact back onto the operation of our program. The means by which teachers have always judged students—written exams, orals, projects, reports, assignments, classwork—exist in the Community wherever and whenever they make sense in the context of particular courses. However, these techniques are used to measure how much a student is progressing, how he has improved, and where he needs further aid. A poor performance by a student on a test does not mean an F in a mark book. It indicates that the teacher must help him to review concepts so that the student can take that test again and ultimately master the course. That is the only procedure that makes sense in anticipation of the kind of final evaluation distributed in the Community.

And, when all is said, that may be the only system that makes sense—period.

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Chapter Eight

THE COMMUNITY AND THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT: PERSONAL GROWTH

Plurality which is not reduced to unity is confusion; unity which does not depend on plurality is tyranny.

Blaise Pascal, *Pensees* [16]

Love is possible only if two persons communicate with each other from the center of their existence, hence if each one of them experiences himself from the center of his existence.

Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* [17]

We had planned so long, so carefully and, we thought, so well during that summer prior to the first day of the Learning Community. The skills schedule was set; the theme was organized; advisor groups had been organized months before; we were convinced that the community spirit would achieve fruition. The big event on that opening day, however, was Angelo chasing Joe into the bathroom where the student was threatening to drop Ange's books into the toilet. To say we were disheartened as we discussed the matter later in the afternoon is a vast understatement. Exhausted by the attempt to make the school's big experiment operate, we were forced to confront a student who was willing to take our philosophy of trust and responsibility and flush it down the old porcelain convenience.

Joe was not well known to us at the time. He had chosen to join the Community as a last recourse before dropping out of school altogether. In fact, such was his reputation in the main school that an incident like that described would have been cause for expulsion, or at least a long suspension. We had the same options. From our vantage point three years later, we are glad we didn't exercise them. And, in a way, we are grateful Joe tested us and our system so early. On that first afternoon, we were forced to deal with the fact that the Community was a two-year school. Why dispose of *any* student for the sake of expediency when there was always time for that student to grow? The idea of the Community means, if it means anything, offering the time and the environment for each student to grow. In the case of Joe, we did have an almost continuous struggle for two years. Eventually, through literally hundreds of talks with his advisor and a great deal of patience from all those who came in contact with him, a change did occur. During his senior year, Joe began to accept his fellow students and his teachers as people, not enemies, as he was convinced that we did not consider him a foe. Joe is in a community college now, the load on his shoulder whittled to a chip.

The Joe situation is an extreme, but a rewarding one.

Such goings-on stretch the seams of our Community's dynamics but ultimately, as success becomes evident, strengthen them. We have found that, in general, allowing a student to be himself breeds an incredible amount of honesty on his part. Even when corrective measures have to be taken, they occur within a special relationship of understanding and rapport.

Personal growth is an abstract concept which, like community itself, can be only demonstrated through functioning examples if it is to have any substance. It is, of course, impossible to measure. Despite all this, we continue to believe that a member of our Learning Community is more likely to reckon with himself, to deal with his own problems, to beneficially adjust his behavior, than if he were part of a larger, more impersonal system.

Two questions probably arise here. First, the staunch traditionalist may well ask if there is any place for spiritual growth or personal growth or finding oneself in school? And, from those assuming that there is, what are the dynamics of a learning environment which allows this growth to take place?

"Sure, sure," we can hear skeptics saying, "the hows and whys of a Learning Community as you describe them sound fine and dandy. But aren't you forgetting that you're dealing with teenagers?"

Teenagers indeed! As our current principal recently reminded us, "You are dealing with a particular kind of person called 'kid.' "

Agreed. But although kids, they are individual kids. And by recognizing their individuality and by simultaneously relying on the common ground between student and teacher, child and adult, parent and child—they're all human—we believe personal development becomes more possible.

Many of us can remember how a high school guidance counselor tried to "set us straight" through a little "heart-to-heart" talk at which we were urged to spill out our guts while the counselor, without revealing his insides, told us where we were right and where wrong. After a while, a

certain cynicism sets in as the student begins to realize that he is in a position of talking "up" to his "betters" and, what's worse, his counselors and teachers are talking "down" to him. As surely as we believe teachers must cease disguising themselves as all-knowing in subject areas, we believe that for the sake of our students, teachers must forego their supposed omniscience, as ego-boosting as it might be, in areas of personal values and self-development.

And yet all teachers, not just those whose job description demands it, should be willing to discuss and deal with the personal needs and problems of students.

In the Community, just as each of us is a language teacher to a degree, each of us a philosophy teacher, each an interdisciplinary teacher; we are, each of us, a values teacher. We encourage, purposefully, individual and group discussions of concerns related not just to academics, but to growing up itself. Happily the five of us have diverse value systems. We don't push any one notion except the responsibilities of each human being to himself and to his community.

Specific and pragmatic questions evolve over the year as a result, in large part, to the proximity of behavior and consequence in the small Learning Community structure. When something "good" happens, approval from Community members is immediate and sincere. When something not so good occurs, the whole Learning Community concept reacts. In a large school system, what does it matter if someone screws up a little. Things will run just as smoothly with or without him. This is just not so in the Learning Community. The concern for the Community as a whole forces all its members to care about each individual in it. One student's cutting or drug-taking or selfishness or, more to the point, just his unhappiness, has a deleterious effect on the Community. If we, as the faculty, had any hesitation with regard to dealing with these personal problems for their own sake, we would be forced, for the sake of the Community itself, to take them on.

We are treading here on the periphery of what is called

in most schools "discipline." In the large school at which "control" is a priority, rules of discipline beget more rules and misdemeanors are punished with little regard as to why they are committed, against what they were intended, or, indeed, whether they should really be considered offenses at all.

In the Community, we hardly ever use the word "discipline." We have no detention or demerits or mandatory suspension. There are rules—of the main school and of the Community—but our sole measures of enforcement are communication, understanding and patience.

Rules of the Learning Community itself have developed over the years, have been explained to the students, and in every case have the support and approbation of the students themselves. Therefore, students who cut classes or leave school without permission or smoke where they shouldn't or don't sign up for themes are few. People are less likely to break their own rules, especially when they have the very real power to ask and demand rules changes when that seems called for. Additionally, the rules are few and simple and sensible. That makes things easier too. But, from time to time, students do break rules and the advisor is informed.

"Dave tells me you cut his theme session yesterday."

"Yeah, but I had to get to work early. Besides it didn't seem like it was going to be too interesting."

"Then why did you sign up for it? It's your choice, you know."

"I didn't like any of them that day."

"Well, then you should start suggesting sessions that do interest you. You have that power. What if everyone started cutting out in boredom? The Community would be dead in a week."

"Yeah, I know. It was dumb."

"You know what was dumber still? Leaving school. That's not just a Community rule, that's a school rule. Do you know what would happen if you were caught? Not only would you be suspended, but the administration would get

on our tail: 'So the Community lets students out early.' We don't need that flack."

"I'm sorry, John. I really am. I didn't even think about that."

"Well, you've got to. We've all got to. Do you like the Community?"

"Of course."

"Then you've got to help us protect it."

It works. Believe it or not, it works. It's honest and sincere and it works.

Those main school rules, of course, provide our biggest headache. There are dozens of them—most, in our own opinion, less than logical. The proclamation of these rules is so at variance with our own system of consensus that Community students, rightfully, are annoyed by them. For the sake of the Community, however, we can hardly be a group of school rule-breakers. Thus, although we urge our students to fight unfair regulations through the student government and parent pressure, we must ask them to enforce these laws on themselves.

Let us now, if we have not already, dispel the notion that we in the Community deal with an elitist kind of adolescent. We have had in our history the best—and what some would call the worst of problems.

When Mel joined us three years ago as a student interested in the original formation of a mini-school, we were delighted. He was a young man of impressive talent and charm. During his senior year, however, he began a gradual slide in accomplishment and commitment and talked openly with his advisor about how little time and effort he was expending because he knew he could get by and graduate with just that. As all five teachers became aware of his story, we felt that behind his apparent openness was a problem that demanded attention. This need caused us to institute our "five-on-one" method of "discipline." We held, not an inquisition, but an open-ended session among all those concerned with Mel's situation to plumb the deepest truth toward a solution. The result of this first encounter

was mind-blowing, for our prize student admitted to being on cocaine. Just the confession of this damned secret was a relief and a help. Even as we were trying to get hold of ourselves, we felt Mel's need to tell us so that he could do something about it. Mel could have taken another path. He could have faked it. He was close to graduation, had his state scholarship, his college acceptances. He could have passed the year while blowing his mind out at home. That kind of schizophrenic existence is not unknown. In the Community, it didn't happen that way.

Five-on-one sessions are last resorts. The Community allows for so many avenues of communication that only when they have failed and a student is in danger of being irretrievably lost are five-on-ones employed. At times, they might include parents, but not always. A student's home life can be such that parent involvement is more damaging than helpful. Before we ask a parent in, we probe the family situation.

Sometimes, the result of a five-on-one is the determination to tighten up a student's schedule, to keep the reins tighter. Some students do not react well, do not know how to handle the freedom offered in the Community. As much as possible, we prefer the student to find his own way. In extreme cases, it is necessary to impose additional restraints for the sake of a student's own success. That's individualization too.

We have mentioned the importance of field trips in the Community's academic program. So often, they also serve to promote casual and sincere talk among students and teachers regarding feelings and thoughts toward school, life, identity. A trip away from the school building depressurizes everybody and spurs person-to-person honesty. For students, even in the Community, a teacher doesn't look so much like a teacher outside the school. He walks, he trips, he rides subways, he goes to the bathroom—he's human. The masks have a way of crumbling in a crowded elevator or around a hot dog stand.

This shredding of masks takes place naturally in the

Community through these trips, through weekly advisor sessions in which everyone talks about anything, advisor consultations, the five-on-ones, and the natural never-ending relationships that grow during every day. An atmosphere develops in which students and teachers are taken as equally deserving of respect and in which it would be downright ridiculous to ignore the sophistication of anyone's feelings or to believe that mutual trust cannot cross the barriers of age.

There is another adjunctive device at work in the Community to deal with issue of personal growth. Y.O.U. groups—communication groups—the acronym being more important than the official "Youth Operating for Understanding," were instituted at our high school two years before the Learning Community began and remain a school-wide service. Luckily both Bill and Dave were trained to lead these mild encounter sessions, the goal of which is not therapeutic, but simply the providing of an environment to make it easy and comfortable for teens to get to know themselves.

When we met to plan the Community, Bill and Dave pushed hard to make these groups, which they had found so worthwhile, regular facets of the Community for everyone. The rest of us were less than sure.

"Is it really good to force students to be in these intensive groups?"

"I'm not so sure I believe in that kind of thing for myself. It all strikes me as somewhat artificial."

"The Community itself has many of the same ends. Shouldn't we rely on it? Won't mass Y.O.U. groups weaken the effectiveness of our program?"

We finally compromised by arranging special groups for Community students but on a solely voluntary basis. As such, they provide still another outlet for the frustrations and hopes and fears of our students.

As they exist, the formal mechanisms blend with the intangibles of the dynamics of the Learning Community to allow individuals to grow and develop as young men and women.

One of those intangibles is simply that the Learning Community is a great place to be. Let not all the heavy philosophy of preceding chapters obscure this centrally important fact: the Learning Community is fun. We enjoy being with each other. We enjoy helping each other. While the rest of the school ponders over why there is so much student apathy and teacher apathy and lack of school spirit, we are having a ball.

In addition to all the events we have described as part of the academic program, there are trips and excursions and parties and dinners and Saturday football games and Sunday bicycle rides arranged just so we can continue to be with each other. Alumni are always dropping by to join us, keeping our history alive. And graduation is a peculiarly sad day.

We have literally lost count of the number of times parents have told us, or written to us: "Johnny loves coming to school. I don't believe it."

And we have lost count of how often we've told that to fellow teachers in the main school. They can't believe it.

We believe it, and we smile a lot. Let us tell a few stories that have put some of those smiles on our faces. Some are dramatic; some are just nice. They will demonstrate better than anything how the individual exists in our Learning Community.

Joey told his advisor that he felt "strange shifts in his personality." He was absolutely unable to cope with them and was really quite scared. The school's guidance counselor had known of Joey's inferiority complex and fits of depression and had, in fact, recommended that he join the Community. Joey was certainly doing well enough academically in the Community in contrast to his career at two other high schools and was more relaxed and more willing to talk to and deal with other people. This is what made him confide in us that he had a lot more to cope with —though he wasn't quite sure what. All the systems of the Community were set in operation from advisor consultation

to Y.O.U. group with Bill to five-on-one to Dave's recommendation for outside, professional therapy. Were all his problems solved? Hardly. But we watched Joey grow up in that year. We saw him responding to our affection, showing us some of his own, and working to overcome his difficulties.

The first parents' night we planned included the usual talk of progress and the handing out of evaluations. The student committee that made the arrangements for it decided that it should be as different from regular parents' nights as the Community is from regular school. Thus, they prepared a buffet of sandwiches and coffee and cake, produced a variety show and ushered and hosted the evening.

A girl wrote in her theme log: "Here in the Learning Community we have people who are really exceptional, but we don't idolize them. I think that's good because there isn't any jealousy that way. Some people (like Ramon) who you think is just a regular all-ok guy is great in certain fields (like math). You'd never know this until you have a certain problem and have to ask someone for help. The reason, I feel, is that in the Learning Community there is a genuine spirit of unity. People don't want to be above others. They all want to be equal and not hurt anybody's feelings through conceit. Everyone tries to help everyone else and so don't intend to become heroes to be considered faultless."

For three years, Terry existed at the school with virtually complete non-acceptance by his peers. Worse, he was the target of ridicule. Emotionally immature with no sense of interpersonal relationships, Terry's stuttering was the imitator's delight. He joined the Community as a senior. In an early English skills class, he was called on to read his poem. There was a spattering of giggles and jeers as he stumbled through his first sentence. The laughter faded as the other students (as they told us later) realized that that

kind of cruelty had no place in a Community. At the end of Terry's reading, the students, having listened to him for the first time in years, broke into sincere applause at what their colleague had accomplished.

A student said during one advisor session, "I've never felt so much trust and guidance coming from so many people. I can't get over it."

Bobby had joined a Y.O.U. group to help rid himself of his shyness. One evening he appeared at the door and spotted a new face. Bill had invited a friend of his to sit in on the session. Terrified, Bobby spun around and started for home. Bill ran after him and pleaded with him to return even if he wanted to keep his mouth shut that night. Bobby returned and he talked. Slowly at first, he talked to all of us at all different times. He started getting involved in all kinds of Community activities and speaking up in class and seminars. Today, Bobby bears little relation to the scared kid of that night two years ago.

Lucy had been the classical discipline problem in the main school. If there was a rule, she was bound to break it. She joined the Community. We expected the worst, but nothing happened. Oh, she broke the school dress regulations once or twice, but after we explained our position about school rules, that ceased. Her advisor, one afternoon, asked her the peculiar question, "How come you haven't been a problem here?"

"I don't know. There's no reason to break rules. I love the Community. I don't want to make trouble for it."

We were meeting about the planned mini-courses when we were informed that Mike's father had died.

"Wow, that's a shame. We'll have to do something, get a group to go to the funeral and send flowers."

"Yeah, I'll call Mike later after we finish with this mini-course stuff."

It was the first pe iod of the day of the funeral when a student screamed, "Th is is disgraceful. We're supposed to be a Community, but wh t do we do to help a guy whose father just died? Nothing. N t even a student delegation!"

"Oh, no. We com letely forgot. Damn. We heard about it the other day, but c mpletely forgot. You're right. That stinks. Well, listen, we can cover this lesson tomorrow. We've got something m ore important now."

With an explanat y word to the rest of us, the entire class left school to att nd the services for Mike's father.

An alumnus wrote "There's one really important thing about life in the Comm unity. We all liked to be there.

"We avoid things e don't like. I have seen my friends try to avoid school or t least ignore it because they didn't like it.

"There was a lot o serious hard work at the Community, but it wa never grim or dull. Fun and laughter play an important part in the learning experience. Learning should not be tense an fearful; it should be pleasurable. That's the way it was n the Learning Community."

Epilogue

EVERY SCHOOL SHOULD HAVE ONE

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You've gone to the finest school all right, Miss Lonely
But you know you only used to get juiced in it.

Bob Dylan, *"Like a Rolling Stone"* [18]

The fact is obvious: even in the "finest," even in the "best," of schools, there are those who can't cope. In larger institutions, even the "finest," sheer bigness becomes oppressive as a "greatest good for the greatest number" philosophy that relies on a monolithic structure militates against the greatest good for those students with unique sensitivities or insecurities and for those labeled as academic or social "rejects" and for those extraordinarily talented or gifted.

Another too obvious fact: the system, the routine, the superstructure of large high schools can sometimes inculcate in its students and teachers such apathy, such boredom, such distaste for learning as to alienate even the secure and "normal" and actually create "Miss and Mister Lonelys."

With these dangers in mind, school administrators must seek to provide in their schools alternative modes of education to meet the different needs of different students. A Learning Community is such an alternative.

We do not claim that a Learning Community is best for all students. There is no "best," no objectively superior way to learn. There are, however, best programs for different individuals. Our Learning Community has provided the students of our high school with a choice. For the students who have selected it, it has offered the best chance at the achievement of their personal and academic goals, their best preparation for college and life. And since a Learning Community combines so many alternatives and choices and options within it, it is a good first step for a school desiring to widen its definition of secondary education.

A Learning Community, as we have described it, is not an economic burden on its parent school, makes vastly more use of the school plant and the community's resources, deals with students who would otherwise frustrate main school faculty and administrators as well as themselves, pays strict attention to the objective criteria school officials and parents are rightly concerned with: entrance exams, college entrance, scholarships; and, indeed, is absolutely the best preparation for the hundreds of Learning Community-like programs

springing up in the nation's colleges and universities.

Most students and teachers, of course, will remain in the mainstream. Even in traditional structures, however, procedures suggested in this book can be instituted to make departments and courses and teachers more responsive to the individual students they serve.

In recent years, the media has publicized the return in many schools to hyper-traditional structures in reaction against the educational fads of the sixties. Simultaneously, though, alternatives such as the Learning Community have grown and flourished. The trend is growing clearer. Now that the revolution is over, we can conclude that different systems of learning should not be at war with each other, but can co-exist. If we are to be more concerned with the education of our young people and less with the egotism of "my system is better than yours," we must begin to agree that diversity is the key to the future. Schools and school systems must begin to provide the widest possible range of programs, from the most to the least rigid, and match them to the skills of their teachers and the capabilities of their students. The good of the students, not the victory of any one theory or educational "ism," should dominate our schools.

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